THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER!

BRIAN JACQUES

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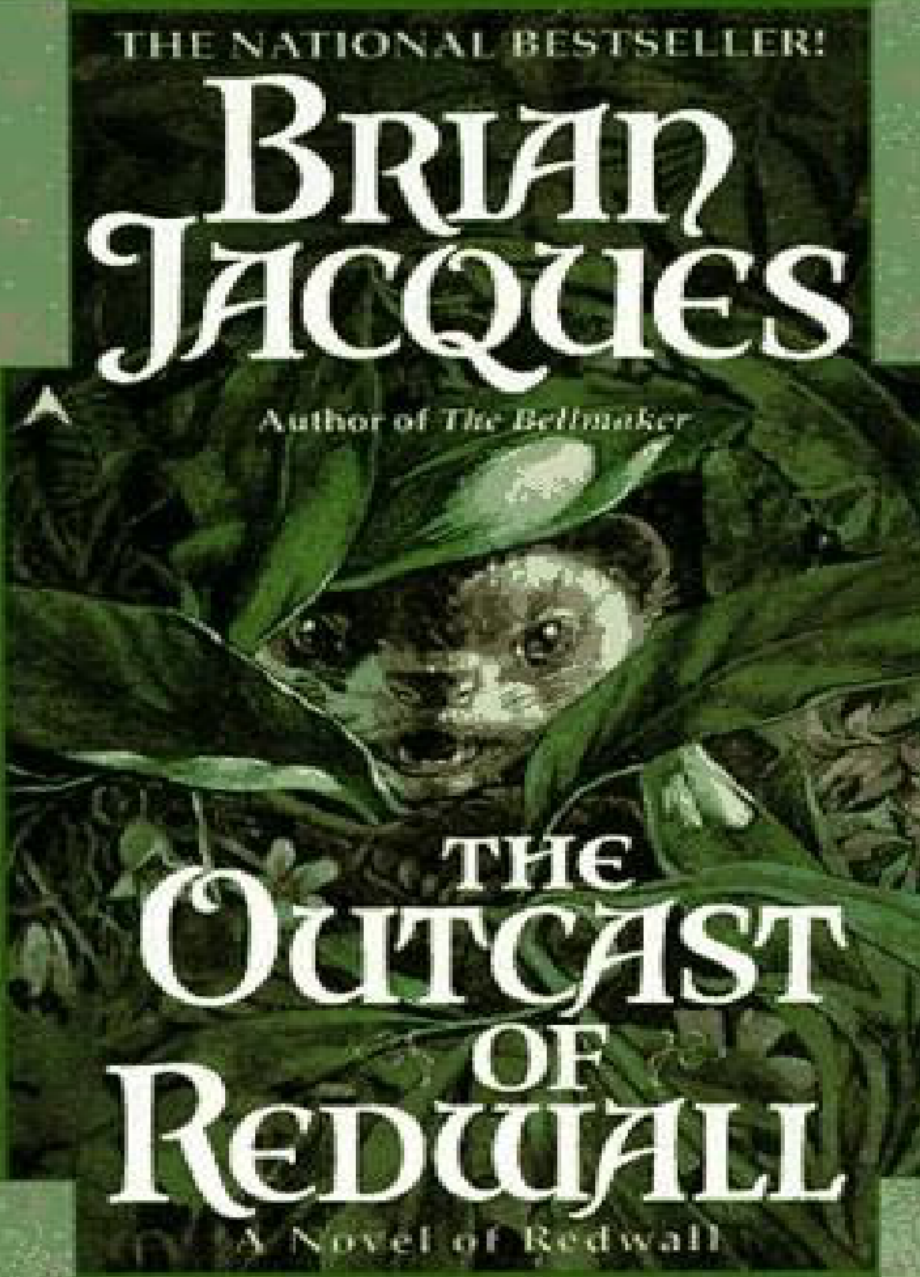

THE OUTCAST OF REDWALL

A Novel of Redwall

Outcast of Redwall

Redwall, Book 8

Brian Jacques

V2.0 There were lots of scanning errors; doubtless many remain.

It was a warm old autumn afternoon of russet and gold, a time for legends and stories of seasons long gone. Blue haze on the far horizon blended sea and sky into one. On the pale sands of a silent shore, ebbing waves had carelessly strewn a broken necklace of shells and pebbles along the tideline. Standing tall and mysterious was the mountain, like some huge beast guarding the coast. Salamandastron! Stronghold of Badger Lords and fighting hares. Once, when the earth was young, it had spouted fire and molten rock. But the winds of time had long since banished smoke from the monolith, cooling its stones. Now Salamandastron was home and fortress combined, run through and honeycombed with halls, caverns, corridors, chambers, tunnels, and secret places.

Midway up the west face on a broad rocky ledge tufted with shrubs and wildflowers, a picnic lunch was set, close to the mouth of a tunnel entrance. Half a score of leverets, young hares, attended by a fully grown harewife, sat watching an ancient otter. Stooped and grayed by many seasons, he stood leaning on an ash pole, shaking his grizzled head in disapproval, as old creatures often will when faced with the young. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly strong for an old-beast.

“Hmph! Wish I was at the Abbey, those young uns at Redwall have proper manners. Instead o layin about gawpin, first thing theyd do would be help a body sit down!

Stifling a smile, the harewife watched die leverets scurrying around the aged otter, doing their best to show respect and concern as they assisted him.

“A seat, ysay, nothing simpler, old chap, er, I mean, sir. “Pop yself down here, sir, grass is nice an soft, wot! “Whoops a daisy! Easy does it, oF sir! “Lean yback on this rock, thats the ticket! “Righto, ancient

one, comfy enough now? The venerable beast nodded slowly. “Well enough, thank ye. Now, are you all goin tstand mere watchin a pore creature starve?

There followed a further scuffle as the young hares set food and drink before their guest.

“Enough tuck to kill a duck here, sir! “Summer Salad an a beaker of Old Mountain Ale. “How about fresh-baked carrotnleek flan? “Some scones with gooseberry jelly, very good yknow! “Rather! Give the old chap a hot pastie! When the old otter was served, the harewife beckoned the young ones back to their seats. “Good show, chaps, but mind ymanners or Mr. Rillbrook wont tell you a story.

Beneath fuzzy brows, Rillbrooks old eyes glinted mischievously. He broke open a steaming pastie and said, grumpily, “Story? Just stopped here trest awhile, marm, wasnt intend-in tdo no storytellin.

A fat, cheeky leveret piped up indignantly, “Scoffin a load of our grub an not tellin a story? I say, what a bally swizz!

The harewife cuffed his long ear lightly. “Burrbob! Thats quite enough from you, mladdo. I dont think you deserve a story after such impudence!

Rillbrook took a deep draught of Mountain Ale, smacked his lips, and wiped a paw across his mouth. “Oh, I dunno, marm, a good story often teaches rotters an rogues to be better creatures.

The leverets shouted encouragement eagerly.

“Rather, tell on, old chap!

“Ill say! Anythin tmake us better creatures, wot?

“Do us the world o good, doncha know!

The ancient otter waited until silence fell and they were watching him expectantly, then he began.

“They call me Rillbrook the Wanderer, son of Rillbrook the Wanderer; my grandsire was called Rillbrook the Wanderer....

The cheeky Burrbob could be heard muttering, “I spose his great great auntie was called Rillbrook the Thingummy, we know that, get on with the yarn. Yowch!

This time the harewifes quick paw did not descend so lightly on the impudent leverets ear. She fixed him with a frosty glare and said, “One more word from you, sir, and its bed with no supper!

Burrbob took the hint, becoming the very model of silence.

Rillbrook started from where he had left off.

“I have wandered all the seasons of my life, near and far, sometimes under forgotten skies, along hidden streams, across silent forests. I have seen many things: mountains topped with snow, hot wastelands where creatures would kill for water. I have eaten among strangebeasts, listened to their songs, poems, and stories, words that have brought tears and laughter to these old eyes. I have heard tales so mysterious that they trouble my memory and still return to roam my dreams on lonely nights.

“Listen now, and I will relate to you a mighty saga. It concerns a Badger Lord who once ruled this mountain, and his mortal enemy, a Ferret Warlord. The destiny of these two was entwined with many creatures, but mainly with two young ones who dwelt at the Abbey of Red wall. They were a pair thrown together by chance, for good or evil.

“Each of us is born to follow a star, be it bright and shining or dark and fated. Sometimes the paths of these stars will cross, bringing love or hatred. However, if you look up at the skies on a clear night, out of all the countless lights that twinkle and shine, there will come one. That star will be seen in a blaze, burning a path of light across the roof of the earth, a great comet. Think on these words as my tale unfolds. Mayhap you will learn something valuable, not about stars, but of the value friendship brings.

Book One: A Friendship Made

1?

Skarlath the kestrel fledged later than his brothers and sisters; the autumn was almost over when he left the nest, never to return. This is the way with hawks. They are fierce and independent, free spirits who love to soar high.

So it was with Skarlath, but being young and reckless he flew north and was trapped by winter. Howling gales from the very edges of the world bore him away. The young kestrel was held captive by a whirling mass of snow that swept him over hill, dale, and forest. Shrieking winds drove him along, a bundle of wet feathers in a tight cocoon of damp white flakes that built on to his plumage in small drifts. Helpless, Skarlath was shot like an arrow into a forest. His body smashed against the trunk of an old hornbeam. Relentlessly the storm plunged onward, keening a wild dirge, leaving in its wake the unconscious young kestrel.

Skarlath regained his senses slowly. It was night, still, with not a breeze about the forest. The cold was bitter and intense, and frost glittered and twinkled on snow-laden tree boughs. Somewhere close he could see the glow of a fire, but could not feel its heat. Voices and raucous laughter came from the lighted area, drawing him, but when he tried to move, the young kestrel squawked aloud in pain. His whole body was pinioned by ice; he was frozen tight, spread-eagled to the trunk of the hornbeam.

Swartt Sixclaw sat closest to the fire. He was a young ferret, but obviously the leader of the threescore vermin who made up the band. Tall, vicious, and sinewy, Swartt had made himself Chieftain, because he was quicker and stronger than any who dared challenge him. He was a fearsome sight to friend and foe alike, his face striped with a sloping pattern of purple and green dye, teeth stained glistening red. Round his neck hung the teeth and claws of dead enemies. His left forepaw bore six clawsit rested on the hilt of a long curved sword thrust through a snakeskin belt.

The kestrels agonized cries brought Swartt upright. Kicking a nearby stoat, he snarled, “Trattak, go and see whats makin that noise.

The stoat scuttled obediently off into the snow-laden trees. It did not take him long to find Skarlath. “Over ere, some stupid bird got itself froze to a tree! he called out.

Swartt smiled wickedly at a young badger tied to a log by a halter. It was a creature about the same age as himself, painfully hobbled and muzzled with rawhide strips. On its head was a broad, golden-colored stripe. Drawing his sword, the ferret touched its point to the rare-colored stripe. “Get up, Scumtripe, and give your master a ride over there, he said.

The vermin crowding around the flames jeered and laughed as Swartt sat upon the badgers back and goaded it forward, raking with his claws and slapping it with the flat of his sword blade. Hobbled close, the young creature could only take small stumbling steps. Anguished growls issued from its bound mouth as it fumbled through the snow.

Swartt thought it no end of a joke, shouting aloud for the benefit of his band, “Giddy up, Scumtripe, ygreat lazy stripedog, move!

Skarlath eyed the ferret fearfully as Swartt brought his face close, leering and licking his lips. “Well now, what ave we ere? A kestrel, not as tasty as quail or wood pigeon, but young and tender, Ill wager. Stuck fast by the ice, are ye, bird? Thatll keep ynice an fresh until you join me at breakfast!

Then, dragging the badger cruelly up, he tied the halter attached to its muzzle to an overhanging limb of the hornbeam. “Heres a good job for ye, Scumtripeguard my breakfast until momin! Yer gettin too fatnlazy lyin by the fire. Swartt Sixclaw strode off, chuckling, to rejoin his band round the flames, leaving the unfortunate pair fastened to the tree.

An hour passed, when all that could be heard was the crackling of pine logs as flames devoured them; the vermin camp was silenced in sleep. Suddenly, in one swift, silent movement, the badger flung his body close against the kestrel, trapping the bird between himself and the bark. At first the young kestrel thought he was to be smothered, but the warmth from the soft fur of the badgers chest started to melt the ice. Slowly, Skarlath felt the blood begin to stir in his veins. Although the badger was tethered and muzzled, he clung on tightly with all his strengm until at last Skarlath was able to move his head and wings. Skarlath jerked his head around until he found himself looking into the dark eyes of the golden-striped creature. Both young ones stared at each other, communicating in silence. Then the badger

held still as the hawks beak went to work. With short, savage movements, Skarlath tore into the rawhide muzzle strips that bound the badger until they were ripped to shreds. The badger clenched and unclenched his teeth, testing his jaws; then bowing his great gold-striped head he devoured the rawhide hobbles that bound his paws, chewing and swallowing the strips in his hunger. They were both free!

“Come, friend, we go, escape, get away! said Skarlath, keeping his voice to a hoarse whisper.

But the badger acted as if he had not heard his companion. Fierce anger burned in his eyes. Stretching his powerful young limbs, the badger seized a bough of the hornbeam and snapped it from the tree with a single wrench. Smashing the bough against the tree trunk, he broke it in two; then, casting aside the thin end, he gripped the heavier piece with both paws. It was about half his own height, thicker at one end than the other, like some huge rough club. Roaring out his challenge, he charged the unwary vermin around the fire.

“Eeulaliaaaaaa!

The camp came to life instantly. Two vermin fell under the club as the badger threw himself at Swartt. Before the ferret had half drawn his sword, the badgers club thudded hard against his foes six-clawed paw. Swartt screeched and fell back injured, yelling to his creatures, “Stop him! Kill him!

Skarlath saw the badger disappear under a crowd of vermin as they tried to bring him down, and he hurtled in, ripping and stabbing with beak and talons. Though the badger was weighted by foebeasts, none could fell him. He stood like a mighty young oak, flailing the club, his deep-throated war cry ringing through the forest.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

Skarlath decided then that his friend was totally mad. The vermin numbers would tell soon and the badger would be brought down to be slain. Fighting his way through, the kestrel landed upon the badgers shoulder and cried into his ear, “Come away or well both be killed. Escape!

The badger struggled to the fires edge and, using his club, he scattered the blazing logs into the ranks of his enemies. Flames whirred and sparks showered as he battered burning wood everywhere. It sizzled and steamed in the snow, throw-ing up choking clouds of smoke and wood ash. Then the two friends were away, the young badger

bounding through the night forest, with Skarlath perched upon his shoulder. Bursting with the energy of freedom, they traveled tirelessly, crashing through bush, briar, and bramble in a welter of flying snow.

Back in the ruined camp, all was confusion, smoke, ashes, and freezing dark night. A weasel called Muggra extricated himself from a snowdrift where the badgers club had bowled him. Rubbing his aching back, he crawled over to where an older vixen named Nightshade was ministering to Swartt, binding his six-clawed paw with a poultice of herbs and snow. Muggra sneaked a pawful of the herbs and nibbed them on his own back, asking, “Shall we follow them an slay em with arrows?

The vixen answered without looking up from her task. “Aye, best do it right away, before they get too far.

Bad temperedly, Swartt made as if to raise his six-clawed paw and swipe out at them both, but the movement caused him to snarl in agony; his paw hung limp and throbbing. “Idiots! Get the fire goin, quick, before we freeze tdeath in the dark here, he spat. “Follow them? With me paw smashed an ruined, an five slain, another five, maybe, wounded or injured? I give orders round ere, mudbrains, we follow em when Im ready, an not before!

With lightning speed he shot out his good paw, and seizing the weasel Muggra by the neck he pulled him close, his hot breath vaporizing on the weasels face as he hissed, “But when this paws fixed an Ive rested by a good fire, therell be noplace that badger can hide from Swartt Sixclaw. Ill follow that one to the edge of the world or to Hellgates, and hell take a long time tdie at the blade of my sword. Ill hunt him tthe death an slay him bit by bit, if it takes me ten seasons!

The vixen Nightshade continued binding Swartts paw, fixing the herbs and snow tight with mud from the earth where the fire had been and strips of aspen bark. “If you leave it later man this night, it will take you a lifetime, she said as she worked.

Swartt winced as the dressing tightened. “Shut yer slimy mouth, fox, always seein the future, or sayin that ydo. I could fix your future with one swing of me sword, thatd keep you quiet!

Muggra was choking under Swartts grip. The ferret looked at the weasel as if just noticing him. “Whatre you doin gurglin there. Didnt I tell yto get a fire goin? Trattak! Hal-frump! Gerrout an forage for dry timber! The rest of you, get shot of those deadbeasts an clear this

place up! He flung the weasel aside.

Later, as fresh flames licked hungrily around resinous pine boughs, Swartt lay back gritting his teeth and muttering savagely, “Well meet again, badger. Make the best of these few days yve got leftIll find ye, Scumtripe!

2?

The badger did not stop running until it was broad daylight, cold and crystal clear. He halted in a smalt clearing at the forest edge. Skarlath fluttered to one side as the hefty young badger threw himself down in the snow and lay panting, tongue lolling, as steam rose from his thick coat. After a while he sat up, cramming pawfuls of the cooling snow into his mouth and gulping them down.

Skarlath hopped about, testing his wings with short swoops, noting gratefully that his pinions were undamaged. Glad to be alive, he shook his plumage and spread his wings. “Heeeeh! Rest, friend, then we go far away! he cried.

The badger stood and picked up his club. “You go where you want. When Ive rested and found something to eat, Im going back there to slay that vermin Swartt Sixclaw!

The young kestrel took flight and wheeled round the badgers head, his wings brushing his friends gold-striped muzzle. “Heekeeer! he cried. “Then you are a deadbeast, my friend. Swartt has too many vermin; you will surely be slain!

The badger clenched his jaws as his body trembled with rage. “For many seasons that ferret held me slave, dragging me around, hobbled and muzzled, starving, beating, making fun of me. Scumtripe, that was his name for meScumtripe! Ill make him repeat my name tenscore times before I slay him with this club. But what is my name?

Whirling his club, the badger charged a dead elm stump and struck the rotting wood a mighty blow ... Whumpjfl A hole appeared in the elm stump as Skarlath shrieked out, “Kreeee! Look, food!

Hazelnuts, chestnuts, and acorns poured out onto the snow, the forgotten cache of some careless squirrel. Anger was momentarily forgotten as the two friends laughed aloud at their good fortune and fell upon the life-giving treasure. Sitting on the stump, the badger cracked shells in his strong teeth and placed the nuts before his friend. Soon they were both crunching and munching.

The kestrel spoke around a beakful of chestnut: “I am Skarlath; I was alone, but you saved my life; now I am with you. Where come you from, friend?

Scratching his golden stripe, the badger chewed thoughtfully. “Im not sure. I think I had a mother, Bella or Bellen or something, its hard to remember. I must have been very young. Boar the Fighter, thats a name I recall, maybe he was my father, or my grandsire, Im not certain. Sometimes I dream about home, or maybe its my imagination, but it feels nice. Then theres the mountain, was that my home? It is all very mixed up. But Swartt Sixclaw, I wont forget him.... The young badger looked quizzically at his friend the kestrel. “Maybe Swartt was right, perhaps my name is Scumtripe. He gave me that name. What do you think my name should be, friend Skarlath?

The kestrel felt fierce pity for the young badger well up in him. He hopped up onto the strong, dark, furred shoulder and cried, “Kreeeee! Your name I dont know. But I know you are a great warrior, slay five and injure many, like a lightning bolt! There is none so quick or strong with a mace as you!

The badger picked up his hornbeam limb and hefted it. “So this is a mace, is it? I never knew a mace looked like this!

Skarlath looked at the hulking young beast with his tree limb. “If you call it a mace, methinks nobeast would argue the point. Warriors like you can be anything they want to be. You are unsure of your true name. I will give you a good name. The mark of the sun is on your face, your speed is that of lightning, you have your own special weapon ... You are Sunflash the Mace!

The badger laughed happily and, standing at his full height, be spun the formidable hornbeam in his paws and roared, “I have a name! It is a good name! I know who I am! Sunflash the Mace! Eeulaliaaaaaaa!

Skarlath took wing and circled high, calling wildly, “Kreeeeeeee! Sunflash the Mace! Kreeeeeeeee!

When the kestrel flew to earth again, Sunflash was away, already backtracking swiftly through die forest. Skarlath winged between the trees after him. “Sunflash, where do you go? he called.

The warrior blood was rising in the badgers eyes as he brushed past Skarlath. “Out of my way, he growled. “I am going to settle accounts with the ferret!

“So, you go to your death! said Skarlath, as he found his perch on the big shoulder and clung doggedly. “I have told you, Swartt has too many vermin, even for you. No matter, I have sworn to stay by your side. I go with you, and we will both be slain!

Sunflash halted. “But what else can I do? he said, a bewildered look on his young face. “Sixclaw is my enemy!

Skarlath was wise for a young kestrel. He rapped his beak lightly against the skull of Sunflash, saying, “We can think! You are brave, but headstrong. Why risk your life against the odds when, if we take our time, we can be certain victors one day.

Sunflash sat down in the snow, leaning his chin on the mace as he gazed at his companion. “Tell me how we will do this. I will listen and learn.

Thus began the education of Sunflash the Mace. Skarlath outlined his plan, which was simple and should be effective. “Why run after Swartt? He will be coming after us. The ferret will lose face in front of his vermin if he lets you live. Let Sixclaw wear himself out chasing us, while we leave this cold land and find warm country, where it is green and there is plenty of food. There we can rest and grow strong.

“I will be your eyes and ears, flying high, watching for Swartt, listening for information. When the time is ripe, men we strike cleverly, my friend, like wasps we worry the ferret and his band. In and out, sting and disappear, slay one or two at a time, strike like sunflash, vanish like smoke. Then Swartt will come to fear us; he will realize that you will not disappearthat one day he will turn round and you will be there, waiting. This will trouble his mind, haunt his sleep. That is my plan. What do you think?

A broad smile spread across Sunflashs face. “It is a great plan, Skarlath. I will learn to think like the kestrel. Lead on!

That day the two friends began traveling south and west on a journey that would last many seasons. Sunflash strode over hitl, valley, and plain, while Skarlath soared and circled overhead, scouting out the land. Winter passed into spring as the two friends journeyed onward, growing up together, getting wiser, seeing, and learning as they went. Sunflash could not stand injustice, and wherever he saw creatures being oppressed or enslaved, the big badger, remembering his own enslavement by Swartt, meted out terrible retribution to their tormentors.

His name and fame began spreading. Songs and poems sprang up in the lands he and Skarlath traveled through. Most were heroic, and some, like this one, were humorous:

I met with six weasels one warm summer night,

And I feared for my life Id be beaten and slain,

But their faces were fearful, all ashen with fright,

They jibbered and whimpered like they were insane.

“O save us, preserve us, O hide us from him,

The one with the mark of the sun on his face,

Ii one paw he carries a great hornbeam limb.

Hes the Warrior Lord they call Sunflash the Mace!

Of a sudden the earth seemed to tremble and shake,

And the verminous weasels passed out in a swoon,

As he came like the wind, with a hawk in his wake,

There he stood strong and tall neath the moon.

Ill never forget what he told me that night,

While he looked at the weasels, stretched out where they fell.

“Youre a very brave beast to down six in one fight, For a small baby dormouse youve done very well!

But as more seasons passed and time went on, things did not quite turn out as Skarlath had said they would. Swartt Sixclaw had tracked them as predicted, and Sunflash and his friend worried them, striking at them many times. Each attack was successful, and the ferret lost quite a few of his vermin to the lightning strikes of Sunflash. But Swartt was no fool. The realization of the badgers guerrilla tactics came home to him one sunny morning in low hill country to the north of Mossflower Woods. Two vermin whom he valued highly, Spurhakk the stoat and Bulfie, a ferret like himself, both hardened and skillful warriors, had vanished overnight. Swartt sat hunched over a small fire, massaging his damaged paw. From shoulder to elbow the limb was as strong as ever, but the six-clawed paw was rigid and unmoving. It ached every morning, reminding him of the winter night when the young badger smashed it with a piece of hornbeam. Nightshade approached with three others who had been out searching for the missing warriors. Swam quickly pulled a gauntlet onto his dead paw. It was a heavy affair, meshed brass mail, with two weighty copper fasteners, and it made a very formidable weapon. He glanced

up at the vixen and snarled, “Well, didyer find em?

Nightshade squatted down on the other side of the fire. “Aye, both sitting up against a sycamore in a copse over yonder, stone dead, each holding one of these. She tossed over two long-stemmed water plants.

Swartt picked them up and inspected them. “Bulrushes? he said.

Nightshade was a healer, and she knew every plant by name. “Thats right, bulrushes. They are also called reed mace, or just mace in some parts of the country.

Swartt Sixciaw flung them on the fire and watched them smolder. “Mace! It doesnt take a genius to work out who did this.

The vixen narrowed her eyes against the smoke of the fire, saying, “You should have caught him and slain him the night he escaped.

Swartt leapt up. Drawing his sword, he scattered the fire and shouted, “Should have! Might have! Would have! Thats in the past! Get those idlers up off their tails, we travel east!

The vixen sprang aside to avoid the burning embers. “East? But my scouts tell me Sunflash still travels south by west. What is there in the east?

“Bowfleg!

Nightshade raised her eyebrows questioningly. “Bowfleg the Warlord?

Swartt thrust the sword back through his belt, sneering, “Bowfleg the Warlord, hah! You mean Bowfleg the Old, Bowfleg the Fat, Bowfleg the Glutton!

Nightshade shrugged. “Still, he leads a great horde. Swartt chuckled evilly as he marched off. “Not for long!

3?

The far northwest fringes of Mossflower Woods are broken by rocky outcrops, gullies, and hills. One could wonder why creatures bothered living there when the woodlands farther inward were so lush and bounteous. But home is home, and often creatures do not like to move away from the familiar surroundings of their birthplaces. So it was with the hedgehog family of Tiny Lingl and the mole kin of Bruff Dubbo, who had shared the same dwelling cave for untold generations. Tirry and his wife, Dearie, had four small hogs, scarce a season and a half old. Not counting his old uncle Blunn and aunt Ummer, Bruff had his wife, Lully, and two little mole maid daughters, Nilly and Podd, to provide for.

However, the dwelling cave of both families was not a happy place. It was a hungry and dangerous time for them, for outside in the gray drizzling afternoon another family waited, a family of five foxes. The old vixen with a hulking son covered the back exit, while the father, an equally old dogfox, sat outside the front entrance with a fully grown son and daughter who towered over him. They had been there nearly half a season, laying siege to the dwelling. It was quite easy to relieve one another for the purposes of eating and sleeping, and still keep up a presence, taunting and reasoning by turns, knowing they had the hedgehogs and moles prisoners in their own home until hunger forced them out.

“Dont be foolish, come out, theres food here, friends, the vixen wheedled.

Tirry Lingl shouted back at them, “Garn, shift yoreselves, vermin, you aint welcome ere!

The hulking fox son sniggered as he called into the back exit, “Heehee, therell be something tasty here when you come out. Heeheehee. You!

The vixen nipped him sharply on his ear. “Shuttup, acorn brain, do you want to scare em to death?

The old father fox cajoled at the front entrance. “Come on, be reasonable, we just want to talk. You dont think wed hurt yer liddle ones, do yer?

Inside the dwelling, Bruff Dubbo helped Tirry to shore up die

barricade they had made from furniture and the bit of earth they could scrabble from the caves rocky interior.

Bruff shook his dark furry head sadly as he spoke in quaint mole dialect to his companion. “Hurr oi wisht oi ad moi ole bownarrers, they vurmintsd soon shift theymselves, hurr aye!

Tiny Lingl peered through a gap between an armchair and a table at the foxes sitting outside. “Theyve got time on their rotten ole side, Bruff, we aint. Liddle uns drank the last o die water this mornin an theres nought but a stale rye crust stannin atwixt us an starvation.

Uncle Blunns quavery voice piped up behind them. “Youm rarscalls! Oim a cummen owt thurr to beat ee with moi gurt stick, ho urr, so oi am!

Bruff turned the old fellow round, patting his back. “Youm a fierce ole haminal, Nuncle Blunn, but et be toime furr ee noontide nap. Hurr thurr, gon lay ee daown.

Back in the cave, the little hedgehogs began weeping for food and a drink, and the two wives, Lully and Dearie, shushed them soothingly. The small group slumped dejected, knowing what their inevitable fate would be.

Sunflash the Mace sat amid the pines and shrubs on a neighbouring hillside, invisible to the foxes as he watched the scene below. Rain dripped from the edges of an old green cloak draped over his head. The warrior looked up now and then, searching the skies for the familiar figure of Skarlath to break through the drab curtain of drizzle, and then rested his chin on his mace handle. Over the seasons he had shaped it into a weapon that would last throughout his life. The handle had a tight binding of whipcord, which formed a loop to go over his paw, and the rest of the club had been fire-hardened, oiled, and polished. Several arrowheads and spear tips were half buried in the wide, rounded head of the mace. Only Sunflash had the skill and strength to wield such a formidable weapon.

Skarlath had seen the foxes, too. He landed out of their sight and crept silently up until he was at Sunflashs side.

“Friend Skarlath, what news of Swartt Sixclaw? said the badger, keeping his eyes on the foxes below.

The kestrel edged under Sunflashs cloak, out of the rain. “Gone east three sunrises back, mayhap we were thinning his ranks too fine for

him to follow us safely.

Sunflash never once moved his eyes from the foxes. “I think youre right, but hell be after us again someday, a little older, angrier, and with a lot more help. His ruined sixclaw wont let him forget us. Maybe well wait here for him.

The kestrels keen eyes began watching the foxes closely. “They look like theyre all one brood. What are they up to?

Sunflash pointed a huge paw at the cave entrance. “I think theyve got some likely victims bottled up in there. I was waiting on your return. The foxes are just bullies; I would not feel justified in slaying them, but they must be taught a lesson. If they see me, theyll be frightened off. Would you go down and speak to those foxes for me, my friend?

The young vixen and her brothers were running out of patience, and they began hurling stones through the cave entrance and shouting, “Get out here, you stupid beasts!

“Ill count to ten and then were coming in after you.... One!

Skarlath fluttered to earth between the cave and the foxes. “Kreeeeee! You must go from here!

The old fox did not appear at all disturbed. “Who are you, bird, what dyer want? he said indignantly.

The kestrel treated him with lofty disdain. “Who I am matters not. I was sent here to tell you to go quickly and stop persecuting whoever lives in yonder cave.

The hulking son and his vixen mother came dashing round from the rear entrance, and the former picked up a stone and made to hurl it at the kestrel.

Skarlath spread his wings wide. “Throw the stone and you will not see nightfall!

“The birds bluffing, the vixen snarled nastily. “Theres Only him! Come on, rush him!

Before diey could move, the mace came hissing through the air and thudded upright in die wet ground. A voice like thunder froze the foxes in their tracks.

“Be still or die! Eeulaliaaaaa!

They watched astounded as a huge badger came bounding down the hillside. Taking a rock ledge in his stride, he gave ft mighty leap and landed among them with a roar.

“I am Sunflash the Mace!

The vermin had heard the name; they crouched against the earth, trembling.

Sunflash nodded to Skarlath. “See who lives in the cave. Tell them they are safe.

Peering through the barricade of furniture, BrufTs wife, Lully, called out, “Yurr, tis an awkburd!

Old Uncle Blunn roused himself from his noontide nap. “Did ee say an awkburd? Wait11 oi gets moi gurt stick, oiH givem billyoh!

Tirry clambered to the top of the barricade, crying, “Lack a day, first foxes, then awks, wotever next? Well, my friend, dyou want to eat us too?

Skarlath kept his voice gentle and tried a smile. “No, I dont want to eat you, I am your friend. Do you know of one called Sunflash the Mace?

Tirrys wife, Dearie, poked her spiky head through a gap in the barricade. “Sunflash the Mace, dyou say? Ive eard of that onea great warrior, they say. Is he outside? Id be o-nored tmake his acquaintance!

It took a great deal of fussing and persuading to get old Uncle Blunn and Auntie Untmer out, but the little ones had no fear at all of the majestic badger warrior. Tiny and Bniff were completely awestruck. The foxes lay face down in the dirt, Skarlath keeping a fierce eye upon them. When Uncle Blunn was eventually coaxed out, he brought his “gurt stick and began laying about at the foxes. Bruff took the stick from the old fellow, saying, “Yurr, Nuncle, doant ee beat yon vur-min round, ee gurt zurr Sunflash moight want tdo that hisself, hurr!

The badger warrior listened carefully as Tirry, acting the part of spokesbeast for both families, explained how the foxes had besieged and starved them. Sunflash listened, stifling a smile as he felt the two tiny molemaids licking rainwater from his paw. Then, grasping his

club, he winked at Skarlath and said, “Stand those vermin upright, friend! Let me look at their scurvy faces while I decide what to do with them!

The mud-faced foxes wept and shivered as they faced the scowling warrior.

“So these are the tormentors of babes and old ones, these are the terrorizers of the defenseless. Well, what have you to say for yourselves?

The father fox was about to speak, when Skarlaths wing buffeted him into silence. The kestrel knew the part he had to play. Scowling murderously, he strutted up and down, saying, “Lord Sunflash, these scum are not fit to speak. They are villains and foebeasts; I say we kill them!

“Whoooaaa, no, please, Lord, spare us, we meant them no harm! The entire fox family flopped down and groveled on the wet earth, wailing piteously.

Skarlath winked at Sunflash, and the badger twirled his mace thoughtfully. “Hmm, if we slay them here it might upset these little ones, then theres all that digging holes and burying carcasses.... Sunflash winked at Tirry, who had caught on to the idea. “What do you think, sir? It was your family that suffered.

Tirry Lingl paced pensively across the backs of the foxes necks, driving them face down into the earth as he ruminated. “You ave a point there, sir, but if you adnt come along, these blaggards wouldve slain us. Praps youd best take them somewhere out of sight and finish them off, they surely deserve no better. But I leave it up to you, Lord Sunflash.

The foxes blubbering rose in a crescendo, and Sunflash had to shout aloud to be heard. “I think Ill do it right here and now if this noise continues!

The fox family were suddenly struck dumb, pressing their quaking bodies against the earth. Bruff Dubbos old Auntie Umrner shook a paw at them. “Burr, youm villyuns, see ow youm loikes a ladle of ee own medicine, hurr hurr, surve ee roight!

Sunflash produced a good-sized lilac leaf and, making a slight split in it, he folded the leaf in two. Then he locked it between both paws, put it to his lips, and blew.

Phweeeeeeeerrrrrr!

He passed the leaf to Tirry Lingl, saying, “Can you make a noise like that?

The hedgehog did, making an even louder noise than Sun-flash. “Makin leaf whistles an blowio on em, dial was one of my favorite pastimes as a young un. Why dyou ask?

Sunflash turned to the foxes, his voice stern. “All of diese good creatures are going to learn that noise, and then they will always carry a leaf with them, night and day. The kestrel can hear it almost a days flight away, and if he does not, then other birds will hear it and tell him. Now listen carefully, foxes, because your lives depend on it. You must leave here and travel north. Never, I say never, must you return. Should you ignore my words and come back to these woods, the creatures you threaten will signal, and I, Sunflash, swear a solemn oath upon my mace that I will seek you out and destroy you. Understood?

Thoroughly cowed, the foxes bobbed their heads up and down, nodding furiously, too scared even to speak. Then Sun-flash began spinning the deadly hornbeam mace from paw to paw, his voice rising menacingly to a full-throated roar.

“I have given you your unworthy lives, but if you are still standing here by the time i have finished speaking, I am certain I will regret my decision. So I want to see how fast you can run, due north. Now!

Wet earth, pebbles, and grass flew as die five former bullies scrabbled into a headlong take-off. In a very short time me sound of their speeding paws was gone. Silence reigned outside the Dubbo-Lingl cave, and then suddenly all present broke out into hearty laughter.

“Hohoho! They went like scalded frogs!

“Hurr hurr! Gurtly afeared an muddy nosed, burr aye!

There followed a round of introductions, congratulations, and thanks from both families. The four baby hogs and the two little molemaids had never seen anything as big and furry as Sunflash. They clambered all over him, smiling into his face and stroking the broad golden stripe on his muzzle.

“Eem be a mounting wid furr on!

“Big wunnerful aminal!

The badger stood stock still, fearing to move lest he upset the tiny creatures or trod on them. His huge face was wreathed in a pleased grin; he had never encountered beasts so small and affectionate. Tirrys wife, Dearie, and her friend Lully the molewife fussed about, throwing their aprons over rneir faces in embarrassment as they chided the babes.

“Do come away now, leave the gennelbeast alone. Lack a day, sir, wot must you think o us all?

“Hurr aye, you an ee awkburd be welcome to rest awhoil in our dwellin cave. Usns be back at eventoide with vittles aplenty, then us11 all make ee well fed, bo urr aye!

Both families fled into the surrounding woodland to forage for food, leaving Sunflash and Skarlath the hospitality of their cave. The two friends shifted the barricade and took their ease on thick woven rush mats. Surrounded by the peace and quiet of the homely atmosphere, they were soon deep in slumber.

In his dreams, Sunflash could hear waves lapping against the shore; he saw pale sand, sea, and the mountain. A great feeling of longing swept over him, and he wanted so badly to be there, yet it seemed distant and intangible. Somewhere a deep voice, that of a grown male badger, was chanting:

“Find me one day neath the sun,

Guarding the land and the seas.

Streams to the rivers must run,

Telling their tales to the breeze.

You are Lord, by the blood of your sires,

From dawn til the daylight dies,

As the sun burns the sea with its fires,

And stars pin nights cloak to the skies.

Find me whenever you will,

Seek me wherever you may.

All of your dreams fulfill,

Ere time like the mist rolls away....

Reality seeped back slowly: a warm glowing fire, tantalizing odors, and the mole and hogbabes stroking his headstripe and tickling Skarlaths wing feathers.

“Wake ee upp, zurrs!

“Vittles be yurr aplenty.

“Mum says you twons will take some feedin!

Tiny shooed the babes off. “Come away, you liddle rogues, let the pore creatures up now.

Around the fire in the caves center various concoctions were cooling on flat rock slabs. Bruff Dubbo presented them with beakers, which he filled from a pottery jug. “Yurr, friends, tis ony dandelion-an-burdock cordial, but et be no-ice an cool tdrink, ho aye!

It was dark, sweet, and delicious, and the two friends slaked their thirst. Dearie LingI pushed two of her brood forward, saying, “Standee up straight, oglets, an say your piece. Cmon now, stop suckin those quills or theyll never arden. Speak out!

Both the small hedgehogs shuffled about, tugging their headspikes respectfully as they recited:

“Thankee sir awk an sir badger...

“For savin all in this cave...

“From the naughty foxes ...

“Aye, naughty, naughty foxes!

“Bad verminy foxes!

“Rotten uckypaw stinky ole foxes!

Dearie wagged a paw at her little ones. “Tut tut! Thats quite enough, thankee! She turned to the two friends, who were hiding smiles by burying their faces in the beakers, and said, “Wot my liddle ones was say in is that our families would like to thank you for rescuin us from the vermin. You must stay ere as long as you wish, our cave is yours.

Come now, friends, enough talkin, elp yourselves to food.

Sunflash and Skarlath had never tasted such good cooking. There was young onion and leek soup, hot brown bread spread with a paste made from beechnuts, a woodland salad, and a huge apple-and-greengage crumble. The crumble was a great favorite with the little ones, who spread it thick with honey.

Old Uncle Bhmn sipped piping hot soup from a wooden bowl gratefully. “Oi wurr feared oid waste away to an ole shadow. Gurr! Vittles do taste gudd arter all that unger!

Sunflash had an enormous appetite, but the good wives of Tiny and Bruff would not hear of him stinting himself.

“Allus plenty more, zurr, thurr be an ole woodland full o vittles for usns tchoose from now eeve set uz free!

And so Sunflash the Mace did full justice to the spread.

It was late into the night when he and the kestrel sprawled by the fire, warm, rested, and, for the first time in many a season, unable to eat another mouthful. The old mole. Auntie Ummer, hunted out a curious-looking instrument, a stout pole with bells, two strings, and a pawdrum attached to its base. She plucked the strings, jangled the bells, and tapped the drum with a footpaw. The babes, who were far too excited to sleep, began jigging and hopping around the fire, clapping their paws.

“Whurrhoo! Play ee gurdelstick! Whurrhoo!

Old Uncle Blunn began tapping his paws and chanting:

“Willy Nilly Nilly, Pod Pod Pod! All youm oglets stamp ee ground, Moi ole paws baint young loike yores. Show us ow ee damce around!

The gurdelstick music speeded up, and the little ones whirled and leaped, jigged and tumbled until they collapsed in a giggling heap, yelling for dandelion-and-burdock cordial. Tirry invited the friends to sing, but his guests declined, Skar-lath being too shy and Sunflash explaining that he had never learned a song, being in captivity most of his young life.

The homely hedgehog patted Sunflashs massive paw. “By me spikes, that is a shame! No matter, my Dearie as a voice like a lark at morn in a meadow, shell cheer you upl

Dearie Lingl had a jolly, clear voice, and she sang happily:

“I once ad a cattypillar come tlive with me,

We was both the best of friends as ever there cd be.

Hed wiggle round upon the ground, hed smile an shake my paw.

An every time that 1 went out, stop in an guard my door.

But men one time when I returned I cried out “Lack a day!

My little cattypiilar, he had left an gone away.

An there upon my mantelpiece a butterfly I saw,

Far too proud to speak to me, he flew right out the door.

Colored bright in warm sunlight, that creature winged away,

Ive never found my cattypillar to this very day.

Which makes me say unto myself, now I am old and wise,

I do like cattypillars, but I cant stand butterflies!

Laughter and applause greeted Dearies song. The two families were used to entertaining themselves, and there followed a whole repertoire of songs, poems, and dances. Then, as the fire was allowed to fall into embers, they took their rest in the warm, dim cave.

Sunflash had never been so happy and contented in his life. He hummed along as one of the small hedgehogs sang herself to sleep drowsily with a curious little chant:

“Arm not alas sand, way south in the west,

So star land a mat, theres where I love best,

Sand not as alarm, lone seabirds do wing,

And alas most ran, list to me whilst I sing.

Each time the babe reached the end of this strange ditty, she went back to the beginning and sang it again, her voice growing drowsier and drowsier until it was silenced by sleep. Something about the jumbled, meaningless words and the sad tune kept going round in

Sunflashs mind. Finally he shook Tiny gently, and said, “Im sorry to disturb you, sir. Are you awake?

“Hm, mm, just about, friend, dyou need ought? “That song your little daughter was singing, what is it? “Oh, you mean the one with all the funny mixed-up words and the nice tune. Its an old thing that my Dearie learned from her mother, she probly learned it from her mother, and so on, way back. All our hoglets know it, pretty tune, silly verse.

Sunflash gazed into the glowing embers through half-closed eyes, and said, “I dont know why, but Id like to learn it.

Tinry smiled as he settled into a comfortable ball. “Ill tell the babes tomorrow, theyll be only too happy to oblige ye, sir.

4?

The seasons turned through spring and summer to a mellow autumn. In the highlands of the far east, Bowflegs drums beat Out their message of warning, while Swaitt and his ragged band of vermin traversed over tor and scrubland. The pounding drums sent word to three rat runners from Bowflegs camp, who took off at a swift lope, heading for a long cliff range that puckered the land like an old scar.

At the foot of the cliffs, bunched close like dirty thunderclouds, lay the tents of Bowfleg the Warlord. The runners halted beneath the purple pavilion awning of the sprawling tent at the hub of it all and prostrated themselves in front of the circular dais. Bowfleg lolled on his throne, peering at the messengers through the puffy eyelids of his swollen features. The old ferret grunted as he leaned his gargantuan bulk forward and asked, “Hwodd do de dromms say?

At the sound of the Warlords strange accent, the senior rat looked up and made his report. “Mighty One, the drums tell of Swartt Sixclaw coming hither with a band numbering not more than twoscore.

Bowfleg dismissed them with a snort. “Chah! Dadd one, de runaway, metink e be long dead!

A stoat Captain standing nearby leaned close to Bowfleg. “Sixclaw was always spoken of as a wildbeast, a strong fighter, even when he was very young. I would watch that one, Lord.

Bowfleg grabbed a roasted thrush from a side table and wrenched off a mouthful. “HSwartt, e can join my order-anks, de gudd fighter iss always of use. If nodd, I crosh im, like dis! The Warlord flattened the thrush carcass against his throne with a single blow of his clenched paw. “Bring im ere when e arrive!

The stoat Captain, whose name was Greenclaw, saluted smartly and marched off.

At mid-noon Swartt Sixclaw entered the camp of Bowfleg bearing giftsa carved spear, two belts studded with bright stones, a flagon of fine wine, and a drinking cup of silver. Swartt1 s small band were disarmed and kept outside under guard by a detachment of swordbeasts, each of whom wore a crimson tabard bearing Bowflegs insignia, a single white fang in a green circle. Greenclaw escorted

Swartt into Bowflegs presence. The ferret knelt respectfully, noting the giant weasel who stood behind the Warlords throne.

The gifts were placed before Bowfleg, who turned them over with the point of his scepter. “Leave us now, he ordered Greenclaw. With a snort of contempt he looked at the young ferret kneeling before him. “When you young an cheeky, you tink you bettern Bowfleg, liddle runaway, gonna bring back mooch plunder. Nobeast cudd tell Swartt any tink den. Ho no, e knew everytink. Chah! Nodd mooch for one who hes away so long, eh?

Swartt could be a charmer when required. Smiling disarm-ingly, he looked up at the Warlord and shrugged. “I can go many places an see many things, but to learn real wisdom an courage I return to the master.

Bowflegs vast bulk shook as he laughed. “Kyahaha! Dadds gudd, you still know who hes master!

Swartt stretched forward and kissed Bowflegs footpaw. “How could I forget, Lordyou taught me all I know. I was young and foolish when I ran away from here. I am wiser now.

The Warlord beckoned Swartt to stand upright. “Im glad to see you godd more sense, budd dont tink you be wiser dan me. Anybeast feel like dadd soon hes dead!

Sixclaw turned aside so the other could not see his eyes. “I must remember that, Lordtoo much wisdom can be the death of a creature, very good!

The old Warlord waved his scepter at the gigantic creature standing behind his throne, saying, “You see dis wizzel? E be Wurgg de Spinecracker. Dis one guard me nightnday, e slaved many manybeasts. You watch!

At a nod from his master, the giant weasel stooped and lifted the throne with Bowfleg sitting on it. Showing no sign of strain or effort, he held it chest high then lowered it slowly at Bowfiegs signal.

“Hwodd you tink o dadd, eh? the fat old ferret Wheezed.

Swartt was impressed. Cleverly he let his mouth fall open wide, shaking his head as if in disbelief. “Never did I see a ;fjeast of that size or power! Lord, you have both wisdom and Strength on your side, nobeast would dare to oppose you.

Bowfleg cocked his head on one side, staring at Swartt pensively. “Den why do you comm ere?

Swartt Sixclaw sat on the top step of the dais. “Only to you, Lord, and to tell you of the rich lands that lie to the south and west. Maybe one day I can travel there with you, as a Captain in your horde.

Bowfleg nibbed a fat paw across his stomach and began to laugh. “Kyahahakyukyuk! I dont travel nowheres, dis iss my land. Hwodd I wanna travel for, godd everytink right ere. I like you, Swam, you young, full of de big ideas. Ere you come oud of nowheres, raggedytaggle! Han wodd you bring me, eh? Spear? I godd many spears. Belts? Nodd bigg enough. Cup an wine? Who nidd dem?

“The spear is a symbol of your power, Lord, said Swartt, indicating the gifts one by one. “The belts are a sign of my support, but the wine is special, fit only for great ones. He uncorked the wine flagon and sniffed it delicately. “The oldest wine of the southlands, dark and sweet with the juice of elderberry and plum, specially for you.

He offered the bottle to Bowfleg. The Warlord sniffed it and smiled craftily. “Hyou tink I be stupid. Ere, I want to see you drink.

Swartt took the flagon, pausing as he held it to his lips. “You see. Lord, I learn from you all the time. If this wine were poison then I would be a deadbeast.... Tipping the flagon, he drank deep. “But I would be the stupid one if I offered you poisoned wine. It is good wine, the best, thats why I brought it to you.

Bowfleg watched Swartt a moment, on the lookout for ill effects, then said, “Give me somm, I tell you if it iss gudd wine!

Swartt offered the bottle, then, as if remembering his manners, he pulled back and filled the big silver drinking cup, which he passed to Bowfleg.

The Warlord smiled over the rim of the cup at him, “I still bes watchin you. Ow you feel, eh?

“Never better, sire. Swartt chuckled. “But if you still doubt me, then try the wine on your giant there.

The Warlord patted the massive weasels paw. “Ah yiss, my hfaitful Wurgg, comm drink.

The weasel lifted the chalice like an eggcup between two of his thick

claws. He emptied it with a loud sucking noise and gave the cup back to his Lord with a smile and a single word: “Good!

Bowfleg put on a face of mock indignation as he looked up at Wurgg. “Hoi! I say hwodds gudd, give me somm a dis wine!

Swartt filled the cup three times before the greedy Warlord was satisfied. Bowfleg lounged back on the throne, confident that the new arrival posed no threat to his leadership. “Zo, hyou back now, Sixclaw, gudd, gudd! You go now, find you-self a tent, inna mornen we spikk more togedder.

Swartt knew he had been dismissed. He made an elegant leg and bowed before he left the tent, saying, “Sleep well, Lord Bowfleg!

5?

Dawn arrived wreathed in soft white mist, promising a mild sunny day. The drums beat out again over the scrub-scarred highlands, but this time the rat runners did not raise the alarm, for only one creature approached the camp. It was the vixen Nightshade, whom Swartt had purposefully instructed to follow him, leaving one days gap between their arrivals.

The rat runners kept their distance from the fox, considering her some kind of wild mystic. Nightshade did nothing to disabuse them of the idea, indeed, she had dressed to look the part. A tatty feather-trimmed cloak swirled about her painted and mud-daubed body, and she carried a long staff decorated with bones, hanks of hair and shells. It clanked and clattered as she shook it at the runners, chanting in a reedy quaver:

“Gurgling, rattling, final breath,

Brings me from Dark Forest gate,

I, the messenger of death.

King of Darkness, Lord of Fate!

Fires from the previous nights embers were being blown into life by a few early risers as the runners escorted the vixen into Lord Bowflegs hordecamp. Spying the main tent with its prominent pavilion, she made her way straight to it. Two stoat sentries guarding the closed tent flap moved nervously aside as the odd-looking fox grimaced and shook her staff at them. Nightshade stood in front of the entrance and howled a long eerie call.

“Hawooooooooo! I am the Seer! Ayaaaaaaaaai! Death has been here!

The runners and sentries were obviously frightened of the ragged vixen, who was now performing a crazy shuffling dance in front of the main tent. They huddled together, muttering.

“I wonder why Lord Bowfleg hasnt heard her?

“Aye, its strange that he hasnt sent Wurgg out to snap er scrawny neck an stop er caterwaulin like that.

“Well, Im not goin to try an move er!

“But we cant just stand ere, whats tbe done?

“I say we go an rouse the Captains, let them sort it out.

“Aye, good idea, mate, come on!

As word of the vixens arrival swept through the camp, the hordebeasts deserted tents and cooking fires en masse to follow the group of officers heading to the main tent. Two stoat Captains, Greenclaw and Aggal, together with a rat named Scraw, who was a senior Counselor, heard all the sentries and nmners had to say. They watched the vixen dancing and chanting in front of the closed pavilion entrance.

“Mightier than the Warlord, Who must come to his call,

I am but a messenger, Death rules over all!

Greenclaw was made of stern stuff. He drew his sword and, rapping out orders, pushed the vixen to one side. “Seize this one and hold er; Ill get tthe bottom o this! Greenclaw ripped the flaps aside and strode boldly into the tent. The other officers followed him in a bunch.

Lord Bowfleg sat slumped in his chair; the giant Wurgg was seated on the top dais step, his back against the throne legs. Both creatures looked as if they were merely sleeping, but the rat Scraw could see differently. He put his face close to Bowflegs, at the same time touching his footpaw to Wurggs limp form.

A short inspection was sufficient for Scraw. He turned to the assembly, shaking his head. “Dead, both dead! Not a mark on either of em. Who could have done this?

Greenclaw voiced his opinions so that all could hear. “I left Lord Bowfleg and Wurgg alive and well with Swartt yesterdaylets ask him!

The six-clawed ferret was dragged into the tent by four armed guards. He struggled free, shouting, “Getcher claws off me or Ill flay yeh alive!

Greenclaw had appointed himself official interrogator. “Answer me, Swartt. What took place here yesterday when you were alone with Lord Bowfleg and Wurgg?

“I gave Lord Bowfleg gifts, Swartt sneered at the officious Captain, “and he said hed accept me into his ranks as a Captain, nothing else.

Scraw picked up the gifts of spear, belts, and wine. He shook the flagon; wine swished inside. “Was this wine one of the gifts you brought? Did the Lord drink any?

Swartt chuckled knowingly. “He certainly did!

“Did you drink the wine also?

“No, itd be churlish tbring wine as a gift and then drink it.

“Did Wurgg?

“No, Lord Bowfleg said that the wine was too good for a clod like him; only Bowfleg drank that wine, Swartt lied.

Scraw was nodding and smiling grimly as he thrust the flagon toward the ferret. “I think this wine is poisoned. Prove that its nottake a sip.

Swartt grabbed the flagon and drank it empty. “Anything else ywant me tdo, rat? he sneered.

Anger was rising in Greenclaw. He snatched the flagon from Swartt and hurled it away, growling, “Youre too smart for your own good, ferret. Why did you come here in the first place, tell me?

Swartt spoke loud, so that the hordebeasts crowded outside the tent could hear him. “I had no need to come here, I was doing well with my own band. Then one night I had a dream. Lord Bowfleg appeared to me and implored me to come to his side with all speedhe said that he needed my help.

Greenclaw curled his lip derisively. “A likely story. Bring in the fox!

Nightshade was prodded in at spearpoint by several soldiers, who did not want to get too close to her. Greenclaw asked Swartt, “Have you ever met this vixen before?

“Never in the light o day, though I often see her in dreams.

“This is all nonsense! snapped Greenclaw as he paced the dais steps angrily.

The vixen shook her staff warningly at him. “Do not mock what you cannot understand. None has seen me in this camp before, yet I knew of Lord Bowflegs death long before I came here. I am the messenger of Death and Fate. I see visions in the stars, the wind, and the eyes of many!

Greenclaw had heard enough. Drawing his sword, he came at the vixen. “Did your visions tell that youd end up dead today?

Scraw stepped in the way, knocking the sword aside. “Put up your weapon, stoat. The fox is a seer. It is bad luck to slay one with gifts like hers.

“A seer, huh! sneered Greenclaw as he sheathed his sword with bad grace. “Well, tell us what you see, vixen!

Nightshade shook her staff until the shells and bones attached to it clattered ominously. She shut her eyes and wailed:

“Seasons of glory will come to the horde, Nobeast will lack plunder while Sixclaw is Lord!

Greenclaw was furious. He turned on Swartt, but the ferret was ready, and before the stoat Captain could unsheathe his sword, Swartt grabbed the carved spear from Aggal and slew Greenclaw.

Nightshade was still chanting and wailing:

“Allbeasts who challenge the Sixclaw will die, Dark Forest gates will reflect in their eye!

Swiftly she moved among the Captains, staring wildly into their eyes. To a beast they believed the seers words, and all looked the other way, avoiding Nightshades mad stare.

Then Swartt Sixclaw strode dramatically forward and, holding the vixens face between both paws, he stared steadily into her eyes, saying, “You shall be my eyes and see all for me; nobeast will be able to hide secret thoughts against me!

Thus it was that the ferret Swartt Sixclaw became Warlord of the great horde, with only a few gifts: two belts, a spear, a good flagon of wine, and one other thinga silver drinking cup whose rim and inside had been smeared with deadly poison!

With that and a clever vixen he had won the day.

The entire horde gathered around a small hillock to hear their new Warlord announce his plans. Swartt had repainted the green and purple stripes upon his face and coated his fangs with fresh red dye. Drawing his curved sword from the wide snakeskin belt, he whirled in a circle, and a magnificent bright blue velvet cloak, which he had

plundered from Bowflegs belongings, swirled around his muscular body. He pointed the sword at the main tent, which still contained the bodies of Bowfleg and Wurgg, and cried aloud, “Burn!

From high on the cliffs a score of weasel archers fired flaming arrows down into the brushwood-laden tent. In moments the whole thing was ablaze. The firelight danced in Swartts eyes as he held up his six-clawed paw for all to see.

“This is what you follow from now on: sixclaw! No more lying about in these hills and scrublands, no more idling under a fatbeast who was too lazy to move! Take down your tents and pack them for travel: today we move west and south to the lands of plenty. Food, plunder, captives! All of these you will have if you follow me into the sunwarmed lands. Aye, me, Swartt Sixclaw the Warlord!

The earth trembled as the massive horde stamped their foot-paws and hammered down their spearbutts. A mighty roar rose up like thunder as it echoed from the cliffs.

“Sixclaaaaaaaw!

Tents were flattened and rolled, drums beat ominously, and banners with the new Sixclaw symbol unfurled on the autumn breeze.

The ferret bared his reddened teeth at the vixen by his side. “Now lets see if Sunflash the Mace can pick this lot off one by one. Hahahahahaaaaa!

6?

The year turned, and bright spring became bounteous summer. Sunflash the Mace straightened up from his labors, arching his mighty back. The two little molemaids, Nilly and Podd, imitated his movements impishly.

“Thats enough potatoes for one day, good work! he said, winking at them.

“Hurr, an thurr be lots o taters left furr another toime. “Ho aye, leavem in ee ground tget ooj an gurtly tastyful.

The big badger looked around at the neat rows he had created last autumn, clearing bush and moving rock until a sizeable food garden bloomed in the forest amid the hills and woodland. Bordered by several fruit trees, plum, apple, and pear, already growing there, plus a couple of horse chestnuts farther back, the crops cut straight furrows. Leek, onion, potato, turnip, peas, and cabbage all thrived, with mushrooms to be found every few days in the dark shelter of a rocky slab to one side of the chestnuts. There would be berries later, red currant, blackberry, raspberry, and strawberry. Sunflash had worked hard alongside his friends, and they had taught him about growing things. He liked cultivating the land, finding he had a natural flair as a farmer.

Sweeping the tiny molemaids up with both paws, Sunflash deposited them on top of the basket of vegetables they had gathered. With a single swing he lifted the basket onto one shoulder and strode off toward the dwelling cave of the Lingl and Dubbo clan. Sunflashs deep voice blended harmoniously with the two moles as all three sang the riddle song:

“Arm not alas sand, way south in the west,

So star land a mat, theres where I love best,

Sand not as alarm, lone seabirds do wing,

And alas most ran, list to me whilst I sing.

Skarlath was sunning himself in the rocks above the cave, watching Dearie Lingl, Aunt Ummer, and Bruffs wife, Lully, preparing lunch on the grass. Old Uncle Blunn came coughing out of the cave in a cloud

of dust, followed by the four small hoglets with Tirry and Bruff. They sat on the grass, dusting their coats down.

Tiny sneezed and blinked, saying, “Bright ole day out ere, aint it!

Sunflash marched up, nodding to one and all. Carefully he lifted the basket down, with the two molemaids sitting atop. “Some nice button mushrooms in here for you, Dearie, he said. “Hows the store chamber coming along, Bruff?

The mole pawed dust from his eyes as he answered, “Near dunn, zurr, wem jus abowt finished. Lined et wi those rock slabs youm found larst wintur, lukfcs andsome, bo urr!

Lully used her apron to protect her paws as she gingerly removed a large flat pie from the rock oven Sunflash had made. “Usns got lots o things dunn since ee been yurr, zurr. Lookit, applenblackbrry pie, yore favrite!

Sunflash sniffed the aroma, his gold-striped face alight with pleasure.

“Come away, oglets, youll burn yore snouts agin1 that ot thing. Dearie shooed the four hoglets off as they crowded round to smell the pie. “Wait11 it cools an Ill give ye a big slice each.

Old Uncle Blunn took the hoglets and the two molemaids off to the stream, which was only a short walk away. Flagons of dandelion-and-burdock cordial, brewed by Blunn, were submerged in the streamwater to keep cool.

“Wash ee dusty pawsVsnouts in yon stream, ee mucky liddle vurmints, aye an ee too, Blunn Dubbo! Aunt Ummer called after them.

Dearie bustled about, preparing salad from the fresh vegetables while Skarlath waddled off behind Lully, who was going to test a cheese she had been turning since early last winter. The good molewife smiled fondly at the kestrel, whom she considered to be her special friend. “On moi loif, zurr, oi never seed an awkburd oo luvved cheeses moren ee. Cumm naow, usll try et furr taste, hurr.

Skarlath eagerly assisted her to roll the cheese out of the caves dark recesses, where it had been maturing. He had helped make the oval-shaped cheese, right from the greensap milk stage, pounding tirelessly at the fat, white grass stems and special tubers, which only true woodlanders knew of. They had gathered nuts together in late autumn, hazel, almond, and chestnuts, to stud their cheese with.

Between them, the kestrel and the molewife peeled off the thin layer of damp crack-willow bark that protected the cheese. It had no rind and was a delicate pale yellow color. A fragrance of almond drifted faintly about them.

Skarlath hopped from talon to talon, his fierce eyes shining. “Kraaaah! Is it ready, marm, shall we taste it?

The good molewife shook as she chuckled, “Aye, youm surpintly shall taste et, zurr, hurr hurr hurr!

Taking a thin, greased twine from her apron pocket, Lully wound the ends round her digging claws and looped the twine over the cheese just below its top, then, placing both footpaws flat against the base of the cheese, she leaned backward, pulling evenly on the twine. The molewife was well experienced in all aspects of cheesemaking. Skarlath watched fascinated as the strong twine traveled smoothly through the cheese, neatly cutting a large oval piece from the top of their creation. Standing on its edge, the slice resembled an oddly shaped harvest moon, with the white of the nuts and thin slivers of their brown skins highlighted against the buttercup hue of the cheese. Breaking two small pieces off, Lully gave one to her friend. They nibbled daintily, commenting.

“Bo IUT, ee be noicen moist wi gudd flavor, aye! “Mmm, wonderful nutty taste, good and firm! “Ho aye, none too solid, none too soft, usns dunn well! Paw shook talon as the cheese makers congratulated each other.

On the sward outside the dwelling cave, the older creatures lay about, watching the young ones play. It had been a satisfying lunch: summer salad served with Lully and Skarlaths new cheese, and fresh oatfarls baked by Auntie Ummer, followed by the magnificent apple and blackberry pie that Lully and Dearie had cooked, all washed down with beakers of old Uncle Blunns dandelion-and-burdock cordial, brought specially cooled from the stream. Sunflash stretched luxuriously and set his back against the sun-warmed rocks as he watched If the babes trying to lift his mace between them.

Tirry smiled at their efforts as he sprawled beside the big badger. “ Twill be many a long season afore they lift that thing, friend.

Sunflash shook his massive head. “Tiny, let us hope that they never have to. Learning the trade of a warrior and living in times of danger can rob a young creature of all its happy seasons and make it grow up

fast and hard, as I did. Peace is a precious thing.

“You brought peace here for our families, said the hedgehog as he patted Sunflashs paw. “You look peaceful an well content, Sunflash. Mayhap you like our life.

The badger had a distant look in his dark eyes. “Oh, I do like the life here. I am happier in this place than I have ever been, and I wish dearly that I could live out all my seasons with you and your families on this very spot.

Tiny Lingl spread his paws at the happy scene surrounding them. “Then why not? You are greatly loved heremake this your home.

It was a tempting proposition. Sunflash thought of the crops and the garden he had created, and the dwelling cave, which was larger now and more comfortable due to his help. Fondly he watched the little ones, laughing and rolling about in the bright noon sun. The older ones too, Aunt Ummer, Uncle Blunn and the rest, were all firm friends, trusting creatures, taking their ease together. His loyal companion, Skarlath, a hawk, was happy to learn the simple life. It was idyllic. He knew it could not last.

Weighing his words carefully, he explained to Tirry. “Listen to what I must say, friend. If I stayed here it would mean great trouble, possibly death for those around me. I have told you of Swartt Sixclaw, the evil ferret. Make no mistake, if I make this place my home, then he will turn up here one day with his band. But even if he did not, my warrior spirit would grow restless and I would need to go and seek him ot. We are sworn lifelong enemies, he and I.

“However, beside all that there are my dreams. Always I see the mountain of fire looming through my slumbers, and strange voices of other badgers, Warrior Lords whose names I do not know, call me. Why I must go to the mountain, where it is, what name it goes by, I do not know. But I am certain that my fate and destiny are bound to the mountain. Each night I dream, and the urge to travel there goes surging through me. One morning you will wake to find me gone. I am as sure of it as the turning of seasons, Tirry.

Hiding his sorrow and disappointment the hedgehog murmured, “I knew all this afore you told me, I felt it every time I looked at your face. You have worked hard here, but only to put things from your mind. But enough o this, mate, were gettin so gloomy well ave it rainin afore nightfall! Youre still a youngbeast with a great life ahead

of ye, Sunflash. But promise me thisyou wont go without sayin good-bye.

“I promise you, Tirry Lingl, I wont leave without a goodbye!

All through that afternoon they took their well-earned leisure, often joining the young ones at play. Skarlath took off to go on one of his high-flying, wide-ranging patrols, leaving word that he would be back by supper. Sunflash took himself off to the stream, where he sat cooling his footpaws in the warm shallows, trying to fathom out the riddle song.

“Arm not alas sand, way south in the west, So star land a mat, theres where I lo

Bruff Dubbos voice interrupted his musings. “Ho, zurr, youm seed ought o those two liddle ogs Gurmil an Tirg?

Sunflash stamped his footpaws dry in the grass. “Havent seen them since lunchtime. Why?

Bruff scratched his head with a heavy digging claw. “Seems ioik theym got theyselves losted, hurr!

Back at the cave, Dearie was questioning the other babes, without much success. Gurmil and Tirg were the two little malehogs. Their sisters, Bitty and Giller, had been playing with the small molemaids, Nilly and Podd, and none of the four was making much sense, as is usual with babes.

Dearie was worried but patient. “Now think careful, liddle uns, whered they two scamps go to?

Bitty pointed at the sky. “Flied way, up there! “No, no, they never, that was Mr. Skarlath, the awkburd. Lack a day, I do wish e were ere now. Nilly, do you know where GurmiFnTirg might be?

“Hurt, a playen in ee water, oi think. “No, that was Sunflash, e was at the stream. Oh, where ave those two liddle villains run off to?

She stared up at Sunflash beseechingly. The big badger radiated calm and confidence as he patted Dearies headspikes gently. “Never fear, marm, Ill find em. Tiny, you circle to the east. Bruff, take a wide loop west. Ill go due south, and well meet up where the big clearing is, the one with the pond, you know it.

Lully threw her apron up over her face to hide her upset. “Burr, theym rascals, oi do wisht zurr awkburd was ere!

Bruff twitched his nose comfortingly at her. “Doant ee fret, moi damsen, usll foind em. Youm stay by yurr wi Dearie an watch tuther liddle uns.

Sunflash did not travel directly south. The late afternoon sun played through the leaves, casting mottled shade patterns on his broad back as he weaved through the woodlands on either side of the faint south path, searching wherever he thought the two little hoglets might have strayed. Birdsong trilled in the stillness of the noontide heat, butterflies fluttered their quiet way from shrub to bush, and bees droned lazily amid clumps of bramble, honeysuckle, and dogrose. But the tranquillity of nature was lost upon the badger as he strode anxiously about, his great mace swinging from one paw, searching for signs of the hedgehog babes.

At last he found something. It was only smalla fragment of apple-and-blackberry-pie crustbut it proved that they had passed this way. They were roaming south. Farther on, Sun-flash chased away a bold blackbird that was pecking at a small morsel of cheese. He quickened his stride. Gurmil and Tirg had to be somewhere hereabouts.

Suddenly a welter of cries and shouts broke upon his ears. Sunflash went thundering and crashing through the woodland and came bounding out into the clearing where he had arranged to meet with Bruff and Tirry. His quick eyes took in the dangerous situation at a single glance. There were the two little hoglets, frightened speechless, clinging on to each other, standing shoulder deep in the pond at the far side of the clearing. Bruff and Tirry, in company with an old squirrel, were circling and shouting. And a short distance from the waters edge, between them, barring their way to the babes, two fully grown adders coiled and reared menacingly. The snakes had not yet seen Sunflash, who slowed his pace immediately and signaled to his friends not to look directly at him and betray his presence to the reptiles.

Tirry Lingl was terrified, but willing to sacrifice his life for the hoglets. He picked up anything close to pawtwigs, soil, grassand flung it at the big scaly adders, his voice shrill with panic. “Leave my liddle uns alone, serpents! Dont you go near em! Gurmil, Tirg, stay in the water, stop there!

The old squirrel joined in the shouting. He obviously knew the snakes

and hated them. “Gah, you coldearted slimers, leave the babes alone!

One adder faced the three creatures, menacing them as the other snake began sliding slowly toward the little ones in the water. Cold evil glittered in the snakes eyes, and its forked tongue quivered as it hissed, “Leave here fasssssst, while you ssstill have livesssssss!

Suddenly, Sunflash made his move. Dropping the mace, he ran into the lake from one side, pounding in a straight line across the shallows toward the hoglets. The adder who had been sliding toward the water speeded up; it was fast, but not as speedy as Sunflash the Mace when his warrior blood was roused. The badger reached the babes ahead of the snake, snatched them both out of the water with a single movement, and carried on hurtling straight across the shallows. The adder was after Sunflash, zipping through the roiling waters in his wake, as duckweed and rushes broken off by the badgers storming speed flopped welly on the ponds surface. The other snake turned away from the three creatures on the bank, its coils bunching and stretching as it raced to intercept the badger.

Sunflash leapt from the water and, bursting onto dry land, he rolled the babes, who had tucked themselves up into the refuge of their soft prickles. They skimmed over the bank like twin orbs, coming to rest way out of danger. Sunflash turned as the adder launched itself from the water and buried its sharp fangs in his side. Its companion wrapped itself round one of the badgers footpaws. Roaring aloud, Sunflash grabbed the snake that was biting him around its neck and plunged back into the water with the other adder still wrapped round his footpaw. Tirry grabbed the hoglets, hugging them to him as Bruff and the old squirrel raced about in the shallows. Unable to help the badger, they splashed and shouted.

Sunflash did not come to a halt until he was in deep, the water lapping near his shoulders. Feeling the snake unwinding itself from his footpaw, he stamped down hard several times until he trapped its head flat beneath his big blunt claws on the bed of the pond and held it there. The other snake had struck him twice, once in the side and once on his back, and now it slid off him into the water. But Sunflash caught it by the tail and began whirling it round above his head. Round and round it went, the creatures on shore hearing the whirr it made as it cut the air in blurring circles. Sunflash roared.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

He flung the adder far and high, and it sped through the air straight

out like an arrow from a bow. Tirry looked up and saw it strike an elm tree limb. The snakes body wrapped round it several times, then it was still, resting draped across the high bough like a soggy piece of rope.

Sunflash ground down hard with his footpaw for a long time, until the wriggling coils beneath the water went limp and still forever. Then, slowly, painfully, he began wading back to land, his side and back one throbbing, agonized mass. The big badger tottered in the shallows as Tirry, Bruff, and the squirrel dashed in and helped him out.

Bruff wrung his paws agitatedly as Sunflash collapsed on the bank. “Yurr, ee been bited by ee surrpints, oi knows et!

The old squirrel grabbed Sunflashs face between both paws and shouted as the badgers eyelids began flickering shut. “Where did yon serpents bite thee? he cried.

Sunflash was sinking into a black pit; he heard the words coming from far away. Making an effort, he answered, “Bitten ... twice ... side ... back ...

Then darkness overtook Sunflash the Mace completely.

7?

The sun broiled the flallands mercilessly, drying up streams to a trickle, baking the earth, and raising dust swirls on the hot wind. It was a hostile waste where even scrub, gorse, and broom barely survived in the parched heat.

Things were not going well for the new Warlord Swartt Sixclaw; there was a murmur of discontent running through the great horde. Swartt sat in his tent, pondering the dilemma facing him: too many soldiers and not enough food or water, and, worst of all, they were lost! The mighty cavalcade had started out on the wrong paw. Some had wanted to go, swayed by Swartts promises of plunder and plenty, but others had wanted to stay, knowing they could get by in the semifertile cliff shadows, where there was at least water and a certain amount of vegetation, birds, and eggs. The whole project had been too unwieldy from the outset, with tents, trappings, and camp followers, most of the hordebeasts having mates and families.

Sometimes Swartt felt as though he were merely the figurehead of a great traveling settlement; and as if that were not enough, he had found himself landed with a wife. Swartt had not known that Bowfleg had a daughter. It was the tradition and unwritten law that she became wife to the new Warlord as a matter of course. Bluefen was her name, and she was quiet and pretty enough. Swartt marveled that such a fat ugly creature as Bowfleg could have sired her. Bluefen largely kept out of Swartts way, as she had with her father, knowing the angry moods and great rages Warlords were capable of.

Swartt dismissed his wife from his mind and concentrated his thoughts on horde problems. How they had lost direction on the desertlike flatlands was anybeasts guess, but he blamed the vixen Nightshade. She should have been calculating their direction while his time was taken up dealing with more important horde matters. Swartt had berated her soundly, sending her off three nights back to find water and food and to get them back on the right trail, south and west. To make doubly sure, he had sent his two killers with her, the weasels Scarback and Marbul. When Swartt had taken command of the horde, these two had immediately caught his eye. They were ambitious and ruthless, coldhearted assassins, just the types he needed to do his secret biddings.

Outside the tent Swartt could hear the horde as they pitched camp.

Travel on the hot windswept plains was impossible at noonthey would move again when eventide cooled the land slightly. Bluefen slipped quietly into the tent, placed a flagon at Swartts side, and hurried out. The Warlord hardly noticed she had been and gone; absently, he knocked the stopper out of the flagon and sipped from it. Pulling a face, he spat out the brackish-tasting water, which hit the footpaw of the stoat Trattak as he entered the tent. Swartt beckoned him inside swiftly, saying, “Shut the tent flap, I dont want everybeast seein you report tme. Are they still at it?

Trattak pulled the tent flap closed.

“Aye, Lord, its as you said. Wildag the ferret Captain and his toady, the rat they call Lardtail, theyre the two. I hung about close to them, alls they do is go from tent to tent talkin about you beind yore back.

Swartt placed the flagon on the ground and sat down by it. “What do they say, tell me? Speak, dont be afraid.

Trattak swallowed hard and crouched close to his master. “They say youve got us all lost and ydont know where yore goin, he said in low, halting tones. “Also they say you aint fit tbe Warlord an that you eat all the best food an drink fine wines from silver goblets while good onest ordebeasts are starvin ... an ...

Swartt Sixclaw nodded understandingly. “Go on, what else? I know its their words an not yours.

Trattak continued, a little more confident. “They say that a dagger between yore ribsd solve a lot o problems, then they could go back an live by the cliffs where things were a lot better. Anyow, Wildags called a meetin secret like, tonight. All the Captains11 be there.

Swartt patted Trattak, noticing the stoat eyeing the flagon. “You did well. Take this if yore thirstyit aint fine wine, only muddy water, but itll do twet yer throat with. Send Nightshade tme the moment she gets back. Go on now, keep an eye out for “er.

The vixen returned at twilight. Swartt had not given the order to move on; the horde had stayed camped in the same place since noon. Leaving the two weasel assassins outside the tent, Nightshade went in to make her report.

Swartt watched her as she laid a lumpy sack in front of him. “The news better be good, foxspeak! he snarled.

Words spilled from the vixens mouth like water from a pitcher. “The word is good, Lord, I have found the southwest trail againtwo days trek should take us out of these desert lands. There is a broad stream, fresh water, small copses with trees and grassy hills. There is food there, fish, birds, and fruit. Look!

She emptied out the sack, which contained roots, tubers, and a couple of russet apples, plus a dead bird, which the vixen held up for Swartts inspection.

“Your weasels Scarback and Marbul killed this bird with slings and stones, she said. “There are many like it where we have been.

Swartt munched on an apple as he turned the carcass with his sword point. He shook his head in disgust. “Its a crow, and an old one at that. You tryin tpoison me?

Before the vixen could answer, Swartt shoved the dead crow back into the sack and laughed wickedly. “Never mind, itll come in handy before the nights through. Well, at least we aint lost anymore. Go an get some sleep, Ill be movin the horde out on the double tomorrow. Send the weasels in here.

The ferret Wildag was older than Swartt, though not as big, and his ally, Lardtail, was a grumpy, fat, oversized rat. By the light of a flickering fire at the outer edge of the camp, the two faced a sizeable gathering of Captains and assorted horde-beasts, all of whom were disaffected with the leadership of Sixclaw. Wildag addressed the meeting, backed up by Lard-tails whining comments.

“Well, how does it feel tbe lost an starvin, buckoes? Lardtail stepped up. “Aye, all Ive had since dawn is a few roots an a mouthful o dirty waterits not good enough, mates!

A voice called out of the crowd, “Theres nought out ere but sand an wind, but if we starve then at least Sixclaws will too!

Wildags paw jabbed the air as he shook his head vigorously. “Swartt Sixclaw starve? Huh, thats a good un, tell em, Lardtail!

“I seen that vixen of his sneakin into camp this evenin. She went straight to Swartts tent, carryin a sack of vittles!

Wildag waved his paws to silence the outraged hubbub. “Did you ear that, friends, a sack of food! Ill wager the scums sittin in is tent right now, drinkin wine an stuffin a roasted duck down his greedy gullet!

Amid the uproar that followed, a sack flew through the air and struck Wildag in the face. Furiously he grabbed the sack and shook it at the assembly. “Who threw this? he yelled.

Swartt stepped into the firelight, his painted face and red-stained fangs highlighted by the flames. Silence fell instantly upon the gathering. Showing no fear or concern, the Warlord winked at the two conspirators and rubbed his paws together in front of the fire. “Gets a bit chilly ere at night when the sun goes in. You cold, Wildag, hungry maybe?

The Captain was at a loss for words, and, sensing something awful was about to happen, Lardtail began shuffling backward.

“Stay where yare, rat, or Ill gut ye!

Lardtail froze, noting that Scarback and Marbul, the two assassins, had materialized out of nowhere and were flanking him.

Swartt spoke to the would-be mutineers in a reasonable tone. “Ive heard that some are sayin were lost? Now what sort of a Warlord would get his horde lost? Two days from here is a broad stream of fresh water, food, fruit growin on the trees. Would I be lost if I knew this? An I tell you some-thin else, the farther on we travel, the better it getsgreener, fatter, richer. I dont tell lies, youll see.

He picked up the sack and faced the ferret Captain. “But as for you, my friend, I dont think you was tellin the truth when you said I was drinkin wine an eatin roast duck. If I was, then Id make sure everybeast got the same as me.

A sob escaped Wildags lips, and he began to tremble. Swartt patted the Captains back reassuringly. “Oh, come on now, bucko, cheer up, ole Sixclaw dont like to see anybeast unappy or ungry. Im willin tshare my vittles with you, but tshow you Im a real comrade Ill let you ave it all for yore-self.

He tipped the old dead crow out of the sack, smiling com-panionably at Wildag. “As ycan see, it aint no roast duck, but yore welcome to it. Then, pinching Lardtails ear cruelly in his claws, Swartt marched the rat over to the crow carcass. “Pick it up, matey, theres a good rat, he said. “Dyou want some?

Hauled up on tip-paw by his ear, the rat whined, “No, Lord, I aint ungry!

Hordebeasts are fickle creatures at best, and now some of the gathering began chuckling as they realized what Swartt was up to. The Warlord winked at them, knowing they would be firmly on his side after he had asserted his power. Wagging his chain-mailed sixclaw in the rats face, he explained firmly, “Wildags yore mate, so I want you to feed this to im right now, all of it. Meat, bone, claws, feathers, beak, the lot! Show Wildag that Swartt is a real friend. I aint just sharin it with im, Im givinim it all out of the goodness of me eart.

Roars of laughter from the pitiless hordebeasts rang out as the two assassins grabbed Wildag in preparation for his awful meal. Swartt silenced them with a wave of his mailed paw. “Im goin to my tent now. Ill eat at the same time we all do, in two days time, or sooner if we march fast. Meanwhile, dont go mutterin an meetin among yoreselves, come to me. If you have anythin to complain about Ill always listen.

Cheers rang in the Warlords ears as he strode off into the . night. He smiled to himself, The horde were with him once more.

The following morning was hot as usual, though not as windy. Swartt waited until the tents were packed and the last rations issued before he stood to address the horde. They gathered around, banners fluttering in the light breeze, drums beating until the entire army stood waiting. Swartt knew that if he was to stay Warlord the one thing he must do was to instill fear of his powers into the hordebeasts. He did not want their affection or comradeshipto Swartt that was mere weakness. Respect and loyalty were only gained by one thing in the ferrets mind. Fear! He demonstrated it fully on that morn in front of his horde.

The rat Lardtail cringed on the ground, flanked by Scarback and Marbul, the two weasel assassins.

“I dont see our Captain Wildag about. Where is he? Swartt Sixclaws voice rang out commandingly.

Marbul, so called because one of his eyes was a sightless white orb, spoke for the trembling rat. “Wildags dead, my Lord!

Swartt managed to look both concerned and astounded. “Dead? How did he die? he asked.

Scarback kicked the quivering Lardtail contemptuously. “This stupid blunderer killed him by feedin him a dead crowbeak, feathers, claws, the lot! Pore Wildag choked.

Swartt shook his head in disbelief. “Choked, eh? Somebeast is goin to pay for chokin a Captain!

Lardtails voice was a strangled sob of protest. “But Lord, you told me to feed the bird to Wildag. I was only carrying out yore orders!

The mailed sixclaw pointed accusingly at the unfortunate rat. “You liar! I never ordered you to kill Wildag, only to feed him. The penalty for slaying a horde Captain is death!

Lardtail screamed and groveled in front of the Warlord. “No, Sire, please! Spare me, Lord Sixclaw!

Swartt turned his back on Lardtail, nodding to Scarback and Marbul as he did. Their daggers flashed in the morning sunlight. Turning back to the horde, Swartt did not even bother glancing down at the slain rat. A chilling silence fell over the mighty army.

Swartt hammered the lesson home with harsh callousness. “Lardtails learned his lesson. So has Wildag. I am Swartt Sixclaw, Warlord of all this horde! I see all, I know all, I hear all! Look at the beast standin next to youhe could be one of my spies. I have many, this is the lesson you must learn. Even thoughts cannot be hidden from me, I can read your mind just by your eyes. I see some of you lookin away from my gaze, but that wont help. My vixen seer, Nightshade, can read thoughts with her eyes closed! Listen now, every slab-sided, droolin, misbegotten mothers whelp of yeh! Yore mine to the death, everybeast! Wherever we go I will conquer all. Bowfleg was ruler of the east scrublands. Hah! I will be Warlord of the whole country! None will stand in my way, and you will see to this! If I say march, starve, fight, die!you will do it without question. This means everybeast, females, young, and families! It is two days march to food and water, and well do it by tomorrow noon. Therell be no stragglerskeep up or die. Drummers, beat double march time. Now!

The drums beat a fierce tattoo as the entire horde moved forward at double their normal marching pace. Heavy cooking utensils and cumbersome possessions were littered in the wake of the marchers as each tried to keep up with the other. Swartt strode out in front, the vixen at his side showing him the route. At the rear of the horde, Marbul and Scarback trotted, blades at the ready to deal with stragglers or deserters. The lesson was being learned, and Swartt had added another title to his namethe Pitiless One!

High above the dust clouds of Swartts army, far out of range from

arrow or sling stone, four crows flew like ragged black specks against the sky. Two of the birds broke off and wheeled south, leaving the other two watching the horde of Sixclaw. Soaring on the high thermals and using the breeze, the first two crows were out of the desert regions and into the fertile hill lands by noon. Circling swiftly, they dropped into a copse of pines.

Krakulat, Ruler of the Crow Brethren, sat immobile on a pine stump, his plumage covered in earth, dust, and pine needles. The huge bird was grieving for his mother, and none dared come near him. The two scouts landed a respectful distance away and waited until Krakulats wife, Bonebeak, waddled up to them before making their report.

“Rakkaaa! The vermin are as many as grains of sand blown by the wind, they come this way. Tomorrow when the sun is this high we will see them, Lady Bonebeak.

The fierce female called to her husband, “Yaggaaa! Did you hear that? The ones who slew your mother are coming to this place!

Krakulats talons sunk into the bark of the pine stump with rage; his bloodshot eyes widened with anticipation as he rasped hoarsely to the trees about him, “Harrkaa! Tomorrow will be the dying day for many vermin, do you hear me, my Brethren? Krakulat has spoken!

A deafening din arose from the copse as hundreds of savage crows set up a mighty cawing. Krakulat shook his feathers until dust and needles flew about him. Blue-black and beautifully iridescent, the mighty bird nodded his frightening beak up and down in a stabbing movement, screaming, “Karraaaa! There will be many vermin for our eggchicks to pick over as the sun whitens the bones of those who slew my mother!

Sunfiash the Mace saw the gates of Dark Forest. He lay on the ground as they began opening before him, slowly, oh, so slowly; without sound of a creak, the mist-shrouded timbers moved. He felt his body being drawn toward them and could not resist, did not want to resist; the burning pains within him eased as he felt the desire to enter Dark Forest and rest. As the gates opened wider he saw two mighty Badger Lords, fully armored. One carried a fearsome sword, the other a double-headed axe. Now a third badger joined them. This one was simply clad and carried no weapons; he smiled at Sunflash.

“My little Sunflash, do you not know me? he said.

Sunflash smiled back through the tears that welled in his eyes.

“Father!

“Yes, my son, I am Barkstripe, husband of your mother, Bella of Brocktree. These two Badger Lords are Boar the Fighter, your grandsire, and Lord Brocktree, your great grand-sire. Listen to them now, they have something important to tell you.

Boar the Fighter and Lord Brocktree barred the gate entrance with sword and axe and spoke as one.

“You cannot enter here, Lord!

Sunflash felt a great sadness come over him. He wanted to join his sires, not to be rejected by them. He felt alone and helpless. “Why do you refuse me entrance when I am weary and wish to sleep, and why do you call me Lord? he asked.

Again the sepulchral tones of the Badger Warriors rang out: “There are many long seasons to be lived before you come here. Do not surrender, rise up, the mountain awaits you! It is in need of a Badger Lord!

8?

Inside the cave dwelling, the squirrel, who was called Elmjak, rubbed his back ruefully. “Mine old bones be yet stiff from all that dragging and pulling, twas the hardest days work in many a long season, friends, thanks to thy rush mat, goodwife Lully.

The mole wife peeked over her apron top. “Hurr, ee ole rush matll be wored out arter draggen it all that way wi zurr badger layin on et, aye, wored out loik usns be.

Outside, the little molemaids and hoglets played on the sward under a soft morning sun. Unaware of how close to death Sunflash lay, they had invented a new game, as infants will, fighting off adders. The two little molemaids clung to each other, shrieking, “Eee! Elp elp, ee sunpints be a goin to eat usns oop!

Gurmil and Tirg were jointly pretending to be Sunflash. “Stop stillwell save ee!

Bitty and Oilier, the two little hogmaids, stood on the sidelines, yelling, “Better savem quick afore they get etted up!

“Gurr! Go way, nasty ole snakers! Gurmil and Tirg roared as they thrashed imaginary adders. “Yah, slinky stinky ole slimy snakes, take tha!

Dearie Lingl hurried out with a paw on her lips. “Shush, ush now, liddle, uns! Keep yore noise down, we got a very sick badger to nurse in there; do be quiet, please!

The babes halted their game and clung to her apron.

“Whoi do ee gurt Sunflasher be sicked, marm?

“Badgers be too big to get sicked!

“Ee surrpints bited im, twenny undred toimes!

“Will Sunflasher get deaded?

“Ee squirrel make im better oi thinks, hurr!

Dearie rummaged in her apron pocket until she came up with some

dried apple pieces, which she gave them, saying, “Sunflashll only get well if you keep very quiet. Be good beasts now, try not to make too much noise, my liddle buttons.

They sat in a row on the grass, watching each other as they ate.

“Youm chewen orful loud, Maister Gurmil!

“I cant elp it, tis a noisy apple piece I got.

“Hurr, then keep ee mouth shutted!

“Then I wont able to talk!

“Gudd, that keep ee soilent, hurr hurr!

Elmjak the squirrel was old and wise. He sat at table with Tirry, Lully, and Bruff, and all four took a breakfast of mint tea and wild oat scones spread with honey. They ate in silence, watching the badger. Sunflash lay on his pallet of rushes and fragrant dried grass, and Skarlath hovered over him. The kestrel had not moved from his friends side for two days and nights.

Dearie crept softly in and tugged Skarlaths back plumage gently. “Come an eat now, sir awk, or well end up nursin you too.

Skarlath followed her reluctantly and they joined the others.

Sunflash moaned softly and tried to turn over. Elmjak hurried to his side and calmed him, bathing the badgers fevered brow with dampened dock leaves. He checked the poultices which he had applied to his patients wounds, saying, “This one will live, mayhap. Never did I see a beast of such strength; no creature known to me could live through even one adder bite. Look at him now, friends, sleeping like a babe!

Tirry poured a beaker of the fragrant mint tea for Elmjak. “More power tyore good poultices, sir, they seem twork right well indeed. You must tell us ow tmake them.

The recipe for the poultices had been in Elmjaks family for long generations, and now he recited it for his new friends:

“If beast be bit by fang of snake, And lying near Dark Forest gate, This ancient poultice you must make, To thwart the paws of fate. Find berries from the rowan tree, Add one small green pine cone, With

young leaf of raspberry, Pounded flat beneath a stone. Heat oer a flame til colored dark, Stir fast to make a paste of it, Bind hot and tight with aspen bark, Unto the limb the serpent bit. Change oft from dawn until nightfall, Make sure the beast lies still, Mayhap hell live to thank us all, If he be strong of will!

Bruff Dubbo wagged a sizeable digging claw in the big badgers direction. “Burrhoo! Nobeast be stronger than ee gurt zurr Sunflash!

Dearie Lingl agreed wholeheartedly with him. “Great seasons! Who ever heard of a beast so mighty that he slayed two poisonteeth after bein struck twice by em?

It had been hard and wearisome getting Sunflash from the pond back to the cave and caring night and day for him, and sleep had only been snatched in fits and starts. Now, with the badger resting peacefully, there was some long-overdue slumber time. Midmoming was calm and warm, and the friends relaxed on the grass outside. Tiring of their games, the little ones sprawled beside their elders. It was not long before gentle summer cast its spelt and, amid distant birdsong and the lazy hum of bees, they were soon dozing off.

However, Gurmil and Tirg did not take kindly to sleeping all day. Shortly before noon they were wide awake. Whispering and chuckling to each other, they tip-pawed past the slumbering elders and made their way into the cave. But they had not gone unnoticed: their sisters, Bitty and Giller, followed by the molemaids Nilly and Podd, came hurrying after them.

They threw their little aprons over their faces in imitation of their mothers.

“Gurt seasons, youm villyuns, wot be ee a doin in yurr?

“Come away now, youm wake Sunflash!

But Gurmil and Tirg were determined to visit their hero. “Garr, we baint wakinim, ony comed to sing the song nice an quiet. Sunflash likes the song.

They gathered round the huge form of the sleeping badger. Nilly twitched her button nose cautiously, saying, “Usns best be singen quiet, lest ee awkburd ears an eaten usns all oop wi ee gurt beak!

Tiny paws stroked the great golden-striped muzzle as the babes sang soft and low.

Dark Forest and its dread gates had receded from Sunflashs (beams; now he wandered lonely through sunlit vales and flower-strewn hillsides. Lying down in the cool shade of a great oak, he looked up at the sky. A shadow passed over him and a face appeared; Sunflash found himself staring into the most beautiful face he had ever seen. It was a badger, wise beyond dreams and calm as a still lake in the dawn. He knew instinctively it was Bella, his mother. In that moment he felt sadness and joy, yearning and fulfillment. Comfort and serenity shone through her smile as she stroked his golden stripe and began singing:

Sunflash executed a great whirl, circling crazily until he fell on his back with an earthshaking thud. Caught up in the wild excitement of the moment, hogbabes and molemaids yelled aloud with their badger friend.

“Salamandastroooooooon!

“Arm not alas sand, way south in the west, So star land a mat, theres where I love best, Sand not as alarm, lone seabirds do wing, And alas most ran, list to me whilst I sing. Ill walk alongside you, my lost little one, Well find the mountain ...

“Salamandastron! bellowed Sunflash, finishing the song.

Wakefulness hit the creatures sleeping outside like a lightning flash and a thunderbolt all in one. They leapt upright, fur and spikes bristling at the sound of the booming roar from within the dwelling cave. Skarlath shrieked with shock and took off into the air like an arrow, and the babes came tumbling and howling into the open as the mighty shout reverberated once more:

“Eeulaliaaaa! Salamandastron!

Limping slightly and supporting himself on his hornbeam mace, the badger appeared in the bright sunlight. Tears flowed openly from his great dark eyes, yet he was smiling. Casting the mace aside, he scooped the petrified babes up in both paws.

“Salamandastroooooooon!

9?

The fire burned bright and late in the dwelling cave that night as the homely celebration went on. A great cauldron of wood-landers stew steamed thickly, its wondrous aroma tickling the noses of all who fancied a second helping, or even a third, or in Sunflashs case, a fourth and fifth. Elmjak and old Uncle Blunn had ranged far and wide for the ingredients. Potatoes, leeks, turnips, and mushrooms had come from the farm patch, but the special touches like watershrimp, wild onion, fennel, and a delicious addition they had never seen before mat Elmjak called southbeans, had taken some finding. The babes greatly enjoyed a summercream pudding that Skarlath and Lully had concocted between them; there was nut bread and even some early strawberry cordial.

Sunflash had told the story of his dream over and over again. Tiny smiled indulgently as his friend recounted the tale once more. Sunflash ladled himself another bowl of stew, saying, “Youre laughing at me, Tiny Lingl.

The good hedgehog smiled even wider. “Nay, not laughin at you, big feller, Im laughin for you. Yore parents an grandsires, you know their names, youve seen em, you know who you are now, aye, an even where yore bound. Hoho! Salamandastron, eh, whod ave thought it?

The badgers huge paw rapped the tabletop as he repeated, “Thats what Ive been telling you, the words of the song all became clear when my mother sang mem. Arm not alas sand. So star land a mat. Sand not as alarm, And alas most ran. They are all jumbled-up forms of the word Salamandastron!

Gurmil climbed onto the table and impudently began helping himself to Sunflashs portion of summercream pudding. “Hahah! But yore mum wouldnt ave knowed the song if we adnt started singin it!

The badger stroked the soft spikes of his small friends bead. “Thats right enough, mate. I might not have recovered if it hadnt been for you young uns!

Podd licked her spoon absently. “Burr aye, zurr, best days wurk ee surrpints ever did, bitin ee!

The badger sat looking slightly puzzled, but the others fell about,

laughing at the molemaids innocent remark.

Auntie Ummer waddled to her corner of the cave and sought out her gurdelstick. Old Uncle Blunn banged his beaker on the tabletop in time to the jangle, rattle, and bump of the instrument, calling, “doom on, moi ole duckyburd, give usns a tune, hurr hurr!

Nilly smiled endearingly at Blunn. “Do ee sing a song, Nunc, sing Wurpldown Dumm.

The old mole chuckled as he patted her velvety head. “Youm gotten oi twisted round yore liddle diggen claw, mis-sie. Roight ho, hurr oi go!

Old Uncle Blunn soon had them laughing at his song.

“Oh, oi knowed a mole called Wurpldown Dumm,

Ee wurr a rascal, a villyun boi gumm,

An ee ad the plumpest an fattest ole tumm,

As ever was seed in yon wuddland.

For brekkist ee eated a duzzing gurt pies,

They say that is tumm wurr as big as is eyes,

Ee kept is mouth opened so ee cudd catch flies,

Ee ett everythink in yon wuddland.

One day as ole Wurpldown Dumm lied asleep,

Ee Lord o Dark Forest came wi a gurt leap

An carried im off furrever to keep,

Ole Wurpldown in ee dark wuddland.

An all ee dead vurmints cried, Coom an see mates,

O boggle us seasons, an lackaday fates,

Yon fat mole ees eatin gurt Dark Forest gates,

O get im back up to ee wuddlands.

Ee said, Oive eated butterflies, oive eated bees,

Oive drinked lots o soups an cordials an teas,

But gates o Dark Forest tastes just loike gudd cheese,

One day oill go back to those wuddlands! “

The merriment continued with more songs and dancing until the babes fell to snoring and had to be carried off to their beds. When all was quiet, Tirry struck a more sober note, saying, “Well, Sunflash, I suppose youll be leavin us soon?

The badger nodded his great golden-striped head slowly. “Aye, Tirry, Ill be setting off an hour before dawn.

Dearie patted his paw. “Youve got to go, friend, you always knew that. Well think kindly of you an all you did for our families.

Skarlath hopped down from the ledge he always liked to perch on. “Tomorrow twill be the start of autumn days. I will stay here awhile with you and make cheeses. Though I will divide my time between sometimes flying off to watch for Swartt Sixclaw and other times keeping an eye on you, Sun-flash. So, badger, you may go with a light heart, knowing these families have a protector.

Sunflash stretched out his heavy paw, running it lightly down Skarlaths plumed back. “What creature ever deserved such a friend as you, my hawk! he said, his voice trembling audibly.

Lully threw her apron up over her face to hide her distress. “Oill make ee oop a gurt pack o vittles, zurr, ee woant be ungered on ee journey, an1 mayap twill remoind ee of usns.

She and Dearie were overcome with tears, and they hurried off. Sunflash stretched out both paws to Tiny and Bruff, and they shook firmly, blinking and nodding a lot. “Go to your beds now, said Sunflash. “I told you I wouldnt leave without saying farewell. So good-bye, Tiny Lingl, and good-bye to you, Bruff Dubbo, my very good friends.

The mole and the hedgehog wiped their eyes and went to their beds.

10?

In the hour before dawn, the dwelling cave was still and warm, and its occupants, all save one, were asleep. Without a backward glance, Sunflash picked up his mace and the sack of provisions; moving softly, he was off on his quest. Outside in the dim light, he started at a sound. Elmjak crept up, a paw upon his lips. The badger nodded, and together they cut into die woodlands, going south and west. Neither beast spoke as they carefully picked their way through bush and undergrowth i until they reached the brow of a small knoll. Amber and lilac iwashed a pale swathe through the eastern skies; woodpigeon, thrush, and blackbird could be heard as they rose to herald the dawn; the earth felt tranquil, green and dew-laden.

Suddenly the old squirrel halted and, grasping his companions mighty paw, he shook it firmly. “Thy path and mine part here. I walked this far with you so that you would not be leaving the dwelling of friends alone.

Sunflash was careful not to squeeze Elmjaks paw too hard. “Thank you, my friend. I would be dead were it not for you. But where do you go now, what path will you travel?

Looking back the way they had come, the squirrel smiled. “My wandering days are done. I will return to the dwelling cave and live happily in peace and plenty with those two families of innocents. Methinks they will have need of my special skills. So worry not, Sunflashlike your kestrel, I will watch over our friends gladly.

The badger touched his golden stripe as a mark of respect. “You are a goodbeast. My heart is lighter knowing you are protecting the families of Tirry and Bruff. We will meet again someday, I feel it. Send a message by Skarlath should you ever need me. Good-bye, Elmjak.

Reaching into his herb bag, the old squirrel drew forth a turquoise stone. It was flat, intricately carved into the shape of a sycamore leaf and strung on a thin cord. He looped it around Sunflashs paw, saying, “This amulet may be of use to you sometime. Show it to any squirrel or otter you may encounter. Tell them it comes from the oakdens of Firjak and was given to you by his son Elmjak. It will make your path easier by bringing you help. Fare you well, Sunflash the Mace. Find your mountain, defeat your enemies, and grow great in the land!

Then with enviable agility in one so old, the squirrel went bounding off through the trees.

Morning sun evaporated the damp and dew, clothing the woodlands in a brief gauze of mist. Sunflash trudged steadily onward as the trees and foliage became more luxurious and dense. Digging his footclaws into the loamy ground, the badger descended a steep wooded hillside, noting a warm decaying odor and the earth growing squelchy as he progressed downward. Upon reaching the bottom, Sunflash was forced to balance between a rock and a rotting beech stump. Seating himself, he unpacked oat scones and a flask of dandelion-and-burdock cordial. He ate and drank slowly as he evaluated the land, the great swamp he would be forced to cross. In front of him, and as far as he could see from left to right, dark treacherous ooze showed between the tall foxgloves, fungus-like growths clung parasitically to half-sunken logs, and clouds of midges swarmed about the mosses and liverwort that abounded everywhere.

From the shelter of clumped elderbushes, the badger was being watched. Many reptilian eyes stared unblinkingly from their hiding places. Sunflash was stoppering his drink flask when a strange sound reached his ears; looking around swiftly he identified the source of the odd noise. It was a reed flute, played by a small skinny newt. The creature had painted itself orange and bright blue with plant dyes. It hopped and frisked about with scant regard for the treacherous surface of the morass, skipping from plant to twig, from rush to flower, tootling and twiddling tunelessly. It popped up alongside Sunflash, virtually pushing his footpaw off the rotten log as it made room for itself.

The badger greeted the newcomer. “Good day to you, little sir....

Further conversation was interrupted as the newt scrabbled to get inside Sunflashs provision sack. The badger nipped the invader neatly by its baggy neckskin and held it aloft. Indignantly, it kicked in mid-air, snarling nastily in a high-pitched nasal squeal, “Ey yew, ey yew, gerroffofme an giz me vikkles, urryup!

Sunflash gave the impudent reptile a warning shake to silence it. “Hold hard there, cheekyface, who dyou think youre talking to?

It tried to strike at the badger with its reed flute. “Stripey-dog thickyead badjerpadjer daftdog ... !

Sunflash had put up with enough. He stunned the newt with a tiny

flick of his free paw beneath its chin. Unknown to him the myriad of reptile eyes still watched from the cover of the elderbushes. Sunflash laid the newt carefully out on the stump and waited for it to recover, and when it stirred and opened one eye, he trapped it gently with a footpaw and lectured it.

“Now dont say a single word or Ill squash you like a gnat! Right, listen to me. Didnt your parents ever teach you any manners? You come here, diving into my bag, demanding food, and then you start insulting me. Have you got no respect for others? Keep a civil tongue in your head, I warn you!

The little reptile swallowed, its throat rising in a gulp. “A wiz ungry, yew got vikkles, giz Smerc sum ... pleez.

“Thats better! said the badger, opening his sack. “My name is Sunflash the Mace. You want foodgood, tell you what Ill do. Obviously you know your way about this swamp, and if you agree to lead me through it Ill feed you. Is it a bargain?

The newt wriggled out from beneath the badgers footpaw. “Barrgin, barrgin! Giz Smerc vikkles, I show yadda way!

Sunflash broke an oatcake in half, twirled a leaf into a cone, and filled it with cordial, and gave them both to Smerc. The skinny little creature ate as if it had lived through a seven-season famine, sucking the drink noisily and chomping at the oatcake until crumbs flew. To the badgers amazement it demolished the food and finished the drink.

Holding out the conical leaf cup, Smerc shook it in Sun-flashs face. “Yehhhh! A like it, goodgood, giz me sum-more!

The badger eyed it coldly until he heard the word.

“Pleez!

Refilling the leaf cone, Sunflash gave it to Smerc with the other half of the oatcake. The newts table manners were totally appalling. When it had finished eating, it grabbed at the amulet that Sunflash had hung around his neck, hissing, “Luvly meggle giz me it, for showyer across swampy!

Sunflash understood Smerc completely. He had spent a lot of his young life in a vermin camp where creatures behaved like that as a matter of routine. The only thing such creatures respected was brute force, and now he decided to show the newt a bit. Picking Smerc up,

Sunflash set him on a low laburnum branch.

“So then, your name is Smerc. Watch and Ill show you why Im called Sunflash the Mace!

Sunflash seized the great hornbeam mace and swung it.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

One sweeping sideways blow at the rotten beech stump caused it to disintegrate, exploding into a shower of damp wood, powdery dust, slugs, and wood lice. When the debris settled there was no sign of the stump. Smerc stood open-mouthed, quivering all over with fear. Sunflash shouldered his mace, saying, “Ive fed you, thats my half of the bargain. Now you will guide me through this swamp. Move, Smerc!

Slow worms, eels, and newts in a silent slithering procession followed as Sunflash negotiated a passage through the wide morass. He followed Smerc, sometimes waist deep as the newt skipped carelessly over lily pads, other times gripping the moss-covered limbs of long-submerged tree trunks. It was tough going. At the center of the swamp a jutting oak branch stuck up at an angle. As he moved toward it, the badger felt the shifting ooze gripping and sucking at his body. He floundered, tasting the foul mud in his mouth, unable to wipe it from his eyes as it flopped and splodged with his wild efforts.

Smercs voice rang out from somewhere nearby. “Grab old o dbranch, stripeydog, or yer sink!

Summoning his strength, Sunflash made a mighty surge forward, grabbing blindly at where he knew the tree limb to be. There was a moments cold panic, then he felt his paw grip wood. Looping the cord of his mace handle over a gnarled burr, he pulled himself from the sticky morass. After what seemed an age, his limbs came clear of the swirling, sucking mud.

Sunflash clung to the wobbly limb, shaking with exhaustion; it had been a formidable task pulling his huge bulk from the swamp. Feeling around slowly he was surprised to find his provision sack still hanging from the old cord that served him as a belt. He dug his paw into the sack and pulled out the flask of dandelion-and-burdock cordial; then, biting out the stopper, the badger tilted his head back and poured the fragrant liquid into his mud-blinded eyes until they were free of swamp dirt. Gratefully he cleared his throat by drinking what was left in the flask, then he looked up to see Smerc and the band of reptiles

who had been following him. The wicked newt was perched on the head of a big eel, obviously the leader.

Sunflash tried ignoring them as he reasoned with Smerc. “Come on, be fair, you havent completed our bargain. Get me out of this swamp. Which way do I go now?

The eels, slow worms, and newts remained silent, fixing the badger with a concentrated basilisk glare. Smerc, however, was delighted that he had lured the badger into a trap. He pointed at Sunflash and giggled insanely. “Yeeheehee! Which way ya go now, stripeydog? Yeeheeheehee! Thiss yer deepest part o thswamp, ony one way tgo, badjerpadjer. Yeeheeheehee! Down!

Hot rage engulfed Sunflash the Mace, and he hurled the empty flask at the sniggering newt. Had his aim been tempered by calmness the missile would have slain Smerc, but as it was, die flask struck a glancing blow to both the newt and the big eel on whose head he was perched. Smerc flopped senseless on the eels head, which was now sporting a livid bruise and a rapidly rising bump.

The eel reared up, opening its mouth to reveal two rows of greeny-yellow, needle-pointed teeth. “Sssssink im! it hissed.

The whole mass of reptiles moved backward, and the oak limb began turning on its side. Sunflash threw himself flat, clinging tightly to the branches. To his horror he saw a thick hawser rise clear of the mud. It was attached underneath the oak limb and the reptiles were pulling on it.

The badger was helpless. He hung on to the turning limb, shouting, “Stop! Stop! What do you want?

The big eel sank back and, wrapping itself around the hawser, it pulled with the others as it answered, “Want you... Sssssink!

The awful realization that there was nowhere to go swept over Sunflash; he held on to the tree limb as it was pulled down, turning slowly into the fathomless depths of mud.

11

Krakulat withdrew his Crow Brethren to a place where the horde of Swartt Sixclaw could not see them. They settled behind low hillocks, waiting for nightfall. The Crow Leader had been off hunting with his Brethren when the weasels Scarback and Marbul had slain his mother with slingstones. Fearfully the old ones reported the murder to Krakulat on his return, and the savage crows rage and grief had been awesome, more so when his scouts reported back to him on the dreadful end his mothers body had met. Krakulat decided to take his ven-geance without regard to life and limb, and once his initial rage had subsided, he planned the time and place his Brethren would strike.

Swartt had suddenly become a great Warlord and the toast of the horde. Never, not even in the eastlands, had the hordebeasts known such a delightful spot. There was a broad-stream, fruit trees, and an abundance of edible vegetation. The fact that no birds were to be seen was forgotten when Aggal the stoat Captain speared a large fat chub in the stream. The vermin soldiers and their families flocked to the water and drank, sported and splashed, some catching watershrimp, others hunting caddisworm and tadpoles. Fires were lit, tents were pitched, and a holiday atmosphere prevailed. Using a tent canvas under the vixen Nightshades supervision, a team of soldiers dragged the stream, bringing in a goodly catch of chub, dace, perch, and even a big old pike.

The six-clawed ferret sat beneath a shady tree, painting glowing pictures of the good times ahead to his officers. Swartts unobtrusive wife, Bluefen, scurried about, serving fruit and fish. Swartt hardly noticed her.

“This is only the start, he said. “Give me one good season travelin southnwest an everybeast in the land11 be flockin to my banner, youll see.

“Hmm, southwest, eh? Is that where the badger is? Scraw the rat, now a Captain, mused idly.

The good mood of Swartt Sixclaw suddenly dissipated, and his voice became a questioning snarl. “Who told you about the badger?

Scraw was not intimidated by the Warlords ill humor. “Some o those

beasts you were running with before you came to the tents of Lord Bowfleg, he answered. “They say the badger is young, but a great warrior, fearless in battle....

Swartt leaned forward anxiously. “What else do they say? Tell me.

“They say he was the one who ruined your sixclawed paw, made it dead forever, and that you have sworn to slay him.

Swartt upturned his metal drinking cup and suddenly dealt it a swift blow with the chain-mailed and copper-bound gauntlet he wore over the withered six-claw. The vessel crumpled, flattened beneath the force of the blow. Swartt stared at Scraw. “Dont ever make the mistake that my sixctaw is useless. Its slain more foebeasts than youve had hot dinners, rat. As for the badger, I hear he calls himself Sunflash the Mace now; take it from me, that ones a walkin deadbeast!

Aggal the stoat Captain made bold enough to ask, “Howll you know where to find this Sunflash the Mace?

Swartt nodded to the vixen. “Tell him.

“Searats; some seasons back we met them on the coast, Nightshade explained briefly. “They told us of a place far in tfie southwest, a mountain ruled by badgers and hares, it has a strange name I cannot remember. The searats said that any badger traveling south and west will eventually arrive at this mountain, something to do with the destiny of badgers. Who knows?

Aggal shrugged dismissively. “Huh, searats! Who can believe that lot of floatin rogues? We slew a few up on the east coast last season; before they died, some of them said they knew of a great redstone Abbey that had been built in the mid-south. Liars, theyd have said fish had wings if theyd thought itd save their miserable lives.

Swartt lied with a straight face to his officers. “I have spoken with a wise old owl; he knew of the badger mountain. You all know that owls dont lie, so gather round and Ill tell you somethin.

The officers gathered closer to Swartt. Information from wise owls was rare, but always true. The ferret Warlord spoke low. “The mountain of badgers and hares, this owl said, was also a storehouse of fabulous treasure, jeweled swords, golden daggers, and shields mounted with pearls and gems. Well take it by force of arms with this great horde. Then Ill split this treasure, but only with my brave Captains. What I tell you is not for other ears, it will be our secret. None of the ordinary

hordebeasts need know. Are you with me? The Captains looked from one to another, their eyes shining greed. Scraw acted as spokesbeast for them as he said, “Were with you, Lord Sixclaw, you can depend on us!

The remainder of the day passed happily for the horde as they fed, played, and napped among the tents that had been set up on the streambanks. Late night found the fires burned to embers. A soft breeze moved the tent flaps and rippled the stream as the horde slept deeply, tired out after their forced march from the flatlands. Even the sentries slept. That was when Krakulat the crow made his move....

Scarback and Marbul were sleeping in the open, outside the Warlords tent. It was their job to guard him, but the two assassins were as tired as any. They did not feel the thin twine made from animal sinews until it began tightening upon their necks, and by then it was too late. Four crows dug their talons into the earth as they strained and pulled in opposite directions on the strangling loops. Meanwhile, Krakulat stirred the embers of a fire at the edge of the camp into leaping flames, Silently, Krakulats wife, Bonebeak, dipped her wing in signal to the army of waiting crows, and the Crow Brethren went to work.

Each of them winged silently over the fire, carrying in their talons a long string. At the end of each string dangled a mass of dried moss and grasses dripping with pine resin. As the Crow Brethren passed over the flames, the fireballs ignited. Speeding like dark phantoms, they flew upward, dropping their blazing burdens onto the tents of Swartts horde. As soon as this was done, they circled high out of range of the flames, waiting.

Three ferrets dashed screaming from a burning tent. Krakulat and his crows dived and slew them as they tried to escape the flames. Now others could be seen against the patches of firelight that had sprung up, illuminating the landscape below. The Crow Brethren took no prisoners; the vengeance of Krakulat was swift and unmerciful.

Swartt hurtled from his tent, ignoring his coughing, choking wife, who staggered behind him. He grabbed the vixen as she dashed past, yelling, “Whatn the name of bloodnfur is goin on? Who set all these tents alight?

Nightshade pointed at four dark shapes attacking a squealing rat in the firelight. “Crows! Theyre all over the place.... Yaaaagh!

A crow fastened its talons in the vixens back; Swartt clubbed it flat

with his mailed paw. Drawing his sword, he roared, “The stream! Everybeast into the water, archers an slingbeasts, rally to me!

The Warlord stood in the shallows, flaying about himself with the flat of his sword blade as he rallied his troops. “Fire arrows an rocks! There, you dummies, there! Cant yer see em in the firelight when they fly down? There aint so many of em! Come on, move yerselves, shoot!

A withering hail of stones and arrows whizzed into the night sky, followed by another and yet another. Krakulat saw the destruction the missiles wreaked on his Brethren and wheeled upward out of range, cawing, “Kraawkaa! Follow me. We will show them the Brethren have no fear. Higher, my warriors, higher!

Nightshade found Swartt and pointed upward. “Lord, theyre out of range, but theyre going to dive down upon us!

The Warlord acted quickly, passing word to his Captains. “Spears an pikes, hold em low til I give the signal!

Swartts quick thinking ended the encounter. Krakulat sent his crows zooming down like thunderbolts, and, unable to stop themselves in time, the last thing most of them heard was Swartt yelling, “Spears an pikes up!

The Crow Brethrens ranks were so drastically thinned by this sudden action that they were forced to take flight.

Morning light found Swartt and his officers seated on the streambank, surveying the smoldering ruins of the hordetents. Soldiers, some with fur badly scorched, kept bringing in reports.

“Weve found the two weasels Scarback and Marbu!. They were strangled to death, Lord.

Swartt dismissed them with a wave of his sword. “Just as well, Id have throttled em meself if theyd lived, for not warnin me of the crow attack. Any more sentries left alive?

Aggal pointed out a pair of rats. “Only those two, Lord.

Swartts face was expressionless as he pronounced sentence. “Slay em, theyre no good to me sleepin on duty. Make sure the rest see yer do it, teach em a lesson!

A weasel called Grayjaw came running up, breathless. “Sire, weve seen the crows. Theyre in that grove of pines over yonder. Give the word an well attack!

Swartt shook his head as if in despair.

“Listen to her. Give the word an well attack. Blockhead! Theyve probably got an ambush set up for us if we go near those pines. Leave em, theres no profit in losin more of us by stayin in this place an wagin war on a lot of crows.

Nightshade slid to the Warlords side and whispered in his ear. Swartt brightened slightly, nodding approval, and, standing up, he called so that all could hear: “Salvage what ycan, pack all gear, were leavin!

The horde broke camp at midmorning. As they turned to march south and west, Swartt nodded to the line of archers standing round a fire. “Give em back what they gave us. Fire!

Burning arrows sped into the pine grove. It was a natural firetrap, with thick layers of dead pine needles providing a floor and old pines leaking resin, supporting half-fallen trees, dry as tinder and highly flammable. Swartt had lost more than threescore hordebeasts to the crows, but it did not make much of a dent in his horde, many of whom mourned the loss of their tents more than that of their dead comrades in arms. Black smoke belched skyward as the Crow Brethren tumbled out like a pile of old dark rags to take refuge on the stream banks.

Krakulat watched the pine grove bum, saying, “Kchaakah! We will follow them and kill them One by one. Come!

The first the horde knew of it was not long after midday. A horderat marching slowly at the rear was seized by a score of crows and lifted screaming into the air. The birds flew as high as they could with their wriggling wailing burden, then they dropped him. He left a dent in the landscape; other hordebeasts leapt to one side to avoid being hit by the falling rat.

After that a whole company of archers was ordered to march at the rear facing backward, their bows ready strung against further attacks. Next the crows picked another rat off the middle right flank, and the archers at the rear could not fire for fear of hitting their comrades. Before sundown a third rat was lifted off, this time from the front left flank of the marching horde. Swartts bad temper descended once more, and he ordered the vixen to march alongside him. Repeatedly

treading on her footpaws and digging her in the side with his mailed paw, he upbraided her. “Burn em out of the pines, Lord? Shortsighted stupidity! Whatve yer made me look like, eh? A slopead like yerself! Those birdsll follow us until were dead or they are. Righto, my bright seer, see me a way out o this, an quick about it!

Chaos was beginning to break out in the horderanks as the rats, realizing that they were the only ones light enough for the crows to lift into the air, started panicking. Pushing and shoving at weasels, stoats, and ferrets, the rats tried to occupy the center of the marching masses, where the crows dared not fly down upon them. Hordebeasts fought the rats viciously, claiming the center spot for themselves and their families, some with young ones. The crows, however, did not have it all their own way. Archers and slingbeasts began a relentless barrage of stones and shafts at the dark-winged harassers.

As night fell Swartt was forced to make camp. A burning ring of fires in the open surrounded the horde, stopping the crows picking off anybeast on the fringes. Half the soldiers were ordered to stand upright, pointing spears, javelins, and longpikes at the sky, while their comrades rested until it was time to relieve them. Swartt ordered Nightshade to sneak off under cover of darkness and scout ahead for a possible solution to their dilemma. Krakulat and his Brethren squatted out of range of the campfires. Bonebeak gave her husband no peace, as she constantly berated him.

“Rakaaah! Vengeance is a fools idea, what good will it do us when we are all dead? You have slain enough of the land-crawlers to pay for your mothers life ten times over. Our Brethren must get on with the business of living, we must find new homes. If you get us all slain, who will be left to say what brave birds we were, what a courageous fool Krakulat was? Kchaah!

She followed the Crow Commander as he waddled angrily between the sleeping Brethren, trying to shake her off.

“Agga! Give your feathers a rest, and your nagging beak too! he snapped. “I will say when I have had my revenge on the vermin. The Brethren follow me, my word is law here. Now leave me alone!

The night wore on with both sides fitful and uneasy, the horde unable to rest because of their guard duties, while the crows were kept awake by the constant tirades of their leaders wife.

It was still several hours to dawn when Nightshade slipped back into

camp with news for Swartt. “Lord, there is a deep winding ravine not far from here. A stream runs through the center of it, and I think there are caves on the stream bank. I saw no sign of other creatures there.

Swartt stood and drew his sword decisively. “Right, tell the Captains tget this lot movin. Well get to the shelter of this ravine an take cover in the caves. Then I can figure out what tdo about these crows!

The horde entered the gorge in darkness, stumbling over the rocky defile at the shallow end of the ravine, still beset by the crows. It was a scene of chaos. Swartt and his Captains yelled commands at the hordebeasts above the cawing din of the birds, vermin fired arrows and slung rocks willy-nilly, others jabbed at the night sky with spears. Splashing through the stream, they bundled into the shaded gloom of the caves. There was not room for all the hordesoldiers, and many were forced to shelter amid the lupin and brambles of the steep ravine sides. Swartt had managed to light a fire in one of the caves. He looked around at the rushes and dry grass pallets in the corners, then said to the vixen, “So, you saw no sign of any other creature, eh? Well, who lives in these caves, tell me that?

Screams and terrified cawing from outside saved the vixen having to answer awkward questions. “Lord, listen, something strange is happening outside! she cried.

The Warlord peered outside, taking care to stay away from the cave entrance. “Well, itll be dawn soon, then well find out.

The agonized choking cry of a hordebeast rang out, causing Swartt and the vixen to start. Nightshade slunk to the rear of the cave, avoiding Swartts glare. He shook a mailed paw at her threateningly, snarling, “By rights I should send you out there, yer cringin cur! Sometimes I think yer more trouble than yer worth.

After a while it went quiet outside, and all that could be heard was the odd moan of vermin who were obviously wounded.

Dawn arrived gray and patched with lowering clouds. A fine drizzle caused the gorge to glisten wetly. Swartt poked his head out of the cave to see half a dozen foxes come splashing through the stream shallows toward him. The leader was a large, tough-looking vixen, and like the others of her escort she carried a bolas, four thonged, with rounded pebbles fastened to its ends. The Warlord tried to hide his surprise when the vixen spoke, for her tongue was a bright purple, unlike any he had seen.

“Be ye the leader of this motley array? she barked.

Swartt could see hordebeasts peeping cautiously from the other caves and scrambling down the gorge sides. His quick eyes took in the number of slain vermin draped over the rocks. More foxes, maybe fifty, were collecting dead crows and heaping them in a pile. The ferret drew his sword and put on a bold face, saying, “Im Swartt Sixclaw, Warlord of all this horde. I see youve slain some of my soldiers. Why?

The vixen spun her bolas idly, clacking the big pebbles together rhythmically. “Follynfie! Twas a mishap; did I not rid ye of the crows?

Looking up, Swartt had to agree. There was no sign of a crow flying anywhere about. He saw a young fox plucking feathers from the carcass of Krakulat to decorate his brush with. “Aye, the crows are gone, sure enough, he said. “What do they call you, friend? Never mind the few of mine you slew, those crows were becomin bothersome.

The foxs purple tongue showed vividly as she answered. “I am Shang Damsontongue, and this is my gorge. Ye may stop awhile, Swartt Sixclaw.... Shangs eyes glistened covetously as she watched Swartts sword. “Ye have many fine metal weapons, she continued. “Thy beasts carry spears and good daggers. I see shields, too, much metal.

Immediately Swartt was on his guard, though he took it as an advantage that the foxes seemed only to be armed with the primitive stone-and-thong bolases. Obviously metal arms were considered precious by the foxes of the gorge. Swartt sheathed his sword, the beginnings of a crafty plan forming in his mind.

12?

The reptiles hissed joyfully as they hauled on the vine hawser. Sunflash wallowed helplessly, and his great weight was sucked under as the tree limb submerged slowly into the ooze. By spreading his paws and holding his head back, he tried to halt his descent into the swamp, but it was useless. He gave a final battle cry before he was lost forever in the murky depths.

“Eeulaliaaaaaa!

Skarlath arrived like a bolt of lightning. In seconds the big eel was writhing in midair, clutched tightly in the kestrels savage talons as he pecked sharply at its head.

“Kreegaah! If my friend sinks, you die! Tell the slimy ones to get beneath him and buoy him up, quick now!

Though he was trapped fast by the neck the eel hissed aloud, “Ssssstop, do not let him sssssink!

Sunflash felt the mud well into his mouth, then suddenly he was pushed upward from beneath, the wriggling mass under his footpaws acting as a raft. Skarlath forced the eel to clench the vine hawser in its mouth, then, beating the air furiously with all his wingpower, the kestrel flew slowly upward, gripping the eel. Beneath him the reptile latched hard on to the vine hawser, knowing its life was at stake.

Fortunately the hawser was long, and Skarlath managed to reach a dry bank with lime and alder trees growing on it. Flying as high as he could, the kestrel dropped the eel among the topmost branches of an alder and grabbed the vine from it. Leaving the eel stranded high in the alder, Skarlath took three turns around the lower trunk, then, securing the hawser, he flew back to Sunflash, calling advice. “Kreeeeh! Feel around for the vine and pull yourself out!

Letting his paws sink, the badger felt about until he touched the oak limb beneath the swamps surface. Sunflash groped wildly, knowing it was his only chance. At one point his head vanished completely under the mud. Skarlath felt a surge of panic, then sudden relief as his friend appeared like some slime-covered primeval monster, rearing up as he pulled and hauled on the hawser that he had found. Blinded by swamp dirt and spitting mud left and right, Sunflash dragged himself

paw over paw, the vine hawser tautening as it rose and slapped against the viscous surface. Skarlath hovered overhead calling encouragement, while the reptiles, who had all risen to the surface, watched unblinkingly as the swamp-covered giant hauled and pulled, grunting and gasping, until he emerged on the dry bank with a final sucking gurgle.

Sunflash the Mace lay completely exhausted, the mud plastering him turning to a gray, cementlike coating in the hot sun. Skarlath strutted around him, carefully pecking the mess from his friends ears and eyes. Spitting out the gritty substance, Sunflash nodded weakly at the reptiles.

“That lot look disappointed. I would have fed them for three seasons after theyd suffocated me, he said.

The slow worms, newts, and eels were lying offshore, still watching intently. Nobeast was more surprised than the badger when Smerc staggered up, one side of his jaw swollen out of shape as he grinned lopsidedly and jeered, “Ello, stripeydog, see yer scaped from dswamp. Heeheehee!

Sunflash made a halfhearted grab at the cheeky newt, but he was too slow. Smerc tottered quickly off into the shrubbery. A moment later he was heard shrilling, “Gerroff me, yew! Lemmego, I dint do nottink!

Two otters hove into view, one hauling Smerc by a back leg. Both beasts looked plump and well fed; they moved with the sure-pawed grace common to otters. Nodding to Skarlath, they peered intently at Sunflash, and then the larger of the two spoke.

“Aye aye, matey, we card the commotion over this way so we cruised over to take a glim. Im Folrig Streampaw an this fat frogwalloper is Ruddle Banksnout.

Ruddle promptly passed possession of Smercs leg to Sunfiash. “Ahoy, just ang on tthis bucko for a tick, matey!

Ruddle hurled himself upon Folrig, and they wrestled and kicked, buffeting each other all over the ground.

“Frogwalloper is it, you bottle-bottomed flotsam, us Bank-snouts was always ten times more andsome than you Stream-paws!

“Haharr! Did yer say andsome? Yore mother wouldnt let yer swim in the water cos you frightened all the fishes!

They rolled over and over, locked together, pummeling each other as they laughed uproariously and traded insults.

“Yore father tried tswap you fer a toadbabe when you was a pup. He said it was nicer lookin by far! Hohohoho!

“Harrharrharr, matey, my ole granma used tsay, show me a good-lookin Streampaw an Ill die appy. Shes still livin!

Sunflash sat up, still with the writhing Smerc in one paw, and said, “Would you two like to stop fighting for a moment, Im getting weary just sitting watching you!

They quit tussling straight away and stooped, staring closely at the mud-caked Sunflash.

“Blow me down, is that a badger beind all that swamp muck?

“Aye, so tis, an he looks prettier than you, even with all that muck on im. Sit still, messmate, Ill soon ave you clean an shipshape with a drop o clear water.

Ruddle dashed off to find water, and Folrig took Smerc from the badger, shaking him by his loose neck skin. “You rotten liddle scumslimer, Ill wager a willowerb to a water-shrimp yore beind all this!

The newt kicked and squealed, pointing upward to the eel draped in the alder branches. “No, no, streamydog, not me, it was im up there!

Folrig grinned broadly at Skarlath. “I spose you put ole squirmskin aloft up there. Why dont ytake this whimperin whelk up to join im? Theyre mates yknow, shame to keep em apart.

Weeping and wailing piteously, the newt was borne up to the high branches and deposited there next to the eel, who was clinging grimly to the thin branches, complaining, “Ffffeel sssssick up here.

Skarlath waggled a talon in his face. “Eelscum, feel grateful this bird let you live!

Ruddle could find only a bit of wet grass, but he cleaned Sunflashs eyes and nostrils as best he could. “There yare, mate, at least ycan see an sniff proper now. Come with me an ole ugly mug there, well navigate yer back to good dry land away from this swamp. Mayap youd like to visit our den an take a bite with us, eh?

Sunflash thanked them and pulled himself upright slowly.

Folrig was looking this way and that. “ old ard, wheres yer pal, the kestrel bird?

Powdered mud fell dustily from the badger as he began walking. “Oh, Skarlath comes and goes as he pleases. No doubt he knows Im safe with you, so he decided to take off for a while. By the way, what about the newt and the eel up there? Hadnt we better let them down? They might starve and die.

Ruddle chuckled. “Not them two, when were gone theyll slither down one way or another. A bit o penance dont do rogues like them no arm.

It was nearly twilight when, after a long and perilous trek, they cleared the swamplands and came to a wooded terrain backed by mounds of smooth ancient rocks. The otters made their way toward the rocks; Sunflash heard water splashing as they skirted the fern-fringed bank of a stream. Looking farther up to where the rounded rocks reared their massive forms, he saw a beautiful waterfall.

Folrig stepped out jauntily, calling back to Sunflash, “Well soon see if yore a badger underneath yore swampcoat, an I ope yore a prettier sight than ole rot-the-apples there!

Fighting and chortling, the two otters dived beneath the falls, letting the torrents batter them. Sunflash was a bit apprehensive at first, but after gingerly stepping beneath the cascade he reveled in the feel of clean, icy water drenching him after the long hot trek through the swamps. Weariness fell from the badgers limbs, and a marvelous sense of well-being enveloped him. With a playful roar he joined the otters in their game, seizing them both in a hug.

“Eeulaliaaa! Im Sunflash the Mace and Im better looking than both of you put together, you nut-nosed, boulder-headed beasts!

Retaliating, Folrig and Ruddle got Sunflash in a double headlock between them, shouting, “Drown im quick afore he scares the young uns!

“Wot an orrible sight, mate, a badger with a butter-dipped nose!

The three fell about, laughing in the water, then suddenly Ruddle plunged deeper into the thick cascade and vanished. Sunflash pawed water from his eyes and looked at Folrig. “Wheres Ruddle gone? he asked.

“Into the den, matey. Ere, give me yore paw an Ill show yer.

It was a cave at the back of the waterfall, completely hidden from view. Stepping from beneath the falls onto a raised ledge, Sunflash followed Folrig around a slight bend, and there they were, in a dry, rush-strewn cavern. Ruddle had already put flint to tinder and set a small fire.

“Welcome in, messmate, he said. “It aint much, but tis ome fer two andsome streamdogs such as us.

Sunflash dried himself by shaking off and rubbing vigorously with aromatic dried grass. Ruddle produced beakers and a big gourd jug full of pennycloud-and-rosehip squash. Folrig busied himself chopping leeks and white turnips into a cauldron, eyeing Sunflashs hornbeam limb as he did. “Thats a mighty big eadbonker, matey. Did you make it?

Sunflash hefted the weapon fondly. “Aye, its my mace, he said.

The irrepressible otter pointed to a bundle of thick red roots. “Mace, eh? Well, if you dont fancy smackin ole Ruddle in the chops to improve is looks, praps youd like to pound up those otroots fer the soup.

Using the head of his mace the badger pulped the roots to shreds. Folrig tossed them into the cauldron along with some dried watershrimp, young nettles, mushrooms, and carrots.

They sat round the fire until the soup was ready, when Ruddle served it steaming hot with chunks of barley bread. The taste was delicious, though the spiciness almost took the badgers breath away. Hurriedly he poured a beakerful of squash down his burning throat. “Phwooh! I feel as though Im on fire. What soup is that?

Folrig began singing.

“When I was just a liddle beast,

I was so small an1 weak,

Id often fall flat on me tail,

An I could ardly speak.

I scarce could totter round the floor,

Me whiskers used to droop,

Til granma made a great big pot

Of good ole otroot soup!

An now Im brisker than a bee,

More fitter than a mole,

Most every day I ear granma say,

Give im another bowl!

Ill live a thousand seasons,

Grow strong as any tree,

Give me a spoon an fetch it soon,

Good otroot soup for me.

As the evening wore on, Sunflash began to enjoy the tangy dish. In fact he ate more than either of his two friends. They sang and recited, ate and drank until all three fell asleep where they sat, around the glowing embers, with the soothing sounds of the falls in the background.

13?

Sunflash did not know whether it was night or day when he woke. Folrig had put more wood upon the embers and blown a fresh fire into light. The badger yawned, stretched, and took a mighty draught of squash from the gourd jug.

For the first time he noticed an opening at the back of the cave. “Ruddle, where does that lead to? Is it a backway out? he asked.

The otter licked a paw and held it up. “It used tbe, messmate; feel that breeze, keeps the cave nicenfresh when the winds blowin in the right direction. Aye, twas once our secret way out, until a boulder shifted in the meltin snows an blocked it. But a little draught still comes through when it blows southerly.

While the two otters prepared breakfast, Sunflash went to investigate the secret exit. Sure enough, a sizeable boulder had blocked it, and all that showed through were a few small cracks of sunlight from outside. The badger worked at clearing the rocks and debris that had lodged round the great stone, until Folrig called him. “If ydont like arrowroot biscuitsno-ney with ot mint tea, then stay where yare, matey, menole frightfacell eat em fer you!

Sunflash needed no second bidding. He enjoyed a hearty breakfast, while explaining what he had in mind.

“Move what bits and pieces you need to the side walls of this caveIm going to unblock your secret backway. Ill push the boulder into the cave from the outsideand when you hear the boulder shifting youd best stay clear of this place. Better yet, come and show me the backway from outside.

The two otters followed him, scoffing and chortling at the idea that any creature could clear the obstruction.

“Nobeastll budge that ole boulder, its there to stay. We both worked at it right through the spring with nary a scrap of luck,tis wedged there for good, Sunflash.

“If anybeast living could move yonder stone, why, wed give im a mighty feed an call im andsome. Hohohoho!

From the outside, the backway was a natural tunnel in the rock above

the falls. Sunflash climbed in and started pulling out slabs and shards of stone that had become wedged around the boulder. These he passed back to his friends for disposal. Once it was reasonably clear, he set his shoulder to the big rock and began to push, grunting and straining as he sought for proper purchase with his footpaws. Folrig and Ruddle sat outside the tunnel, concern evident in their voices.

“Sunflash, matey, come out o there,tis no use!

“Youll urt yoreself, friend, it aint worth it fer a daft ole boulder like thatn!

The large gold-striped head poked from the tunnel opening and glared at them; warrior blood was beginning to rise in the eyes of Sunflash.

“Listen, you two ugly mugs, Id advise you both to shut up! Youre my friends, seeIve been guided through the swamps, been cared for, fed, and bedded in your home. So now Im repaying you by clearing this secret way out, then Ill be on my way. Now both of you, sit tight here and not another word!

Thoroughly chastened, Folrig and Ruddle watched their friend disappear back into the tunnel.

Setting his back full against the boulder, Sunflash lodged his paws into the walls on either side of him, his footpaws flat on the stone floor as he began to push. Muscles bunching and sinews strained, he concentrated all his mind on defeating the mighty boulder jammed squarely into the passage. The powerful jaws clenched vicelike, and froth bubbled around his lips as he strained, veins bulging and claws scarring deep into the rock walls.

There was a slight creak, and dust powdered from the boulder edges to mingle with the sweat dripping from Sunflashs muzzle. Straining and pushing even harder, the badger shut his eyes tight as a red mist enveloped his senses. Then the four badgers were with him in spirit, his father, mother, and both grandsires, speaking as in one echoing voice.

“Through wintercold and summerheat, The Badger Lord knows not defeat! Point of spear or blade of sword, Nought can stop the Badger Lord!

A thunderous battle cry ripped from the very depths of the badgers cavernous chest, and blood coursed through his frame in a torrent as he slammed his back into the boulder.

“Eeulaliaaaaaaa!

The huge stone rolled forward, free of its constraints. Lying stretched upon his back, Sunflash opened his eyes and watched as the boulder rumbled off down the passageway. Picking up speed on the slope, it boomed its way through the cavern, swerving around the corner of the otters dwelling and crashing into the cascading curtain of the waterfall. Folrig and Ruddle had heard the commotion; they dashed to the edge of the rocks, following the course of the noise.

“Blisterin barnacles, mate. Look!

The boulder came catapulting out of the cataracts center to crash into the stream below with a terrific splash. Folrig and Ruddle danced about wildly on the rocks edge.

“Hohoho, bucko, Sunflash did it, I told yer he would!

“On me oath, messmate, I never doubted e would!

Sunflash cleansed himself of the dust and perspiration by taking a final refreshing shower beneath the greengold, sunlight-laced waters of the falls. When he had washed he stretched out to dry on the grassy banks of the stream below. Folrig and Ruddle bounded up, both carrying traveling staves and bearing three haversacks of food.

The badger sat up and shook himself. “Hmm, and where do you two frogs nightmares think youre off to, if I may make so bold to ask?

Ruddle answered for them both. “With you, of course, O good-lookin one.

Sunflash picked up his mace and one of the haversacks. “Huh! Thats what you thinkIm not having two mudfaces like you pair following me about and scaring off the birds.

Folrig shouldered his haversack, grinning. “Belay that talk, butterstripe, were bound to go with you. You wear the sign of Firjaks Oakden; we must follow it.

Sunflash remembered the greenstone sycamore leaf talisman given to him by Elmjak, which still hung about his neck. The resolute expressions on his friends faces told him that argument was useless. As they tramped southward he took the greenstone symbol in his paw and inspected it, musing, “This must be a very powerful omen. Elmjak told me that all squirrels and otters would aid me if I wore it. But

why?

As they pressed deeper into dry, heavily wooded forestland, Folrig explained the significance of Firjaks talisman. “One time o day the squirrels an otters in these parts kept themselves to themselves, never botherin with each other. Except for two liddle uns. They were Firjak, son of the Squirrel-queen, an Bankrose, daughter of a great Skipper of Otters. These two were great liddle pals, they played tgether often. But one day they was both taken by searats, captured an marched off, far from these woods. Well, Firjak, he bit through is bonds an escaped, then the liddle feller followed the rats, an one night while they slept e slew two sentries an liberated Bankrose. Firjak was wounded in the scuffle, an even though e was but no moren a babe, e carried Bankrose up into a big ole sycamore an kept those rats at bay with a tiny sling an some pebbles until a trackin party of ottersnsquirrels arrived an rescued em both. Young Firjak was sore wounded, down to is last pebble, too, a big flat green one, too large tfit the sling. Thats the one yore wearin round yore neck, mateythe Skipper of Otters carved it to look like a sycamore leaf. After that the squirrel an otterfolk became allies. So now yknow why anybeast wearin that leafstone commands the respect an loyalty of all otters an squirrels.

Sunflash looked at the talisman with new respect. “A tale of great courage. What happened to Firjak?

“Oh, Firjak recovered, but is footpaw was so lamed they say e rarely climbed a tree after that. Learned to swim, e did, somebeasts say e was more otter than squirrel in the finish.

Sunflash was curious about the capture of Firjak and Bank-rose. “You say they were taken by searats. I never knew that searats came this far inland.

Ruddle pointed westward, saying, “What dyou mean? We aint that far inland, the great waters are only a few days over yonder.

“Then thats the way well go, said Sunflash, changing his course. “Once I reach the sea Im sure Ill only have to keep traveling south. Come on, you beauties!

Folrig seemed rather hesitant. “Er, it wouldnt be advisable to set a course that way, mate, searats an Corsairs ang about the coast like ants in oney.

Sunflash kept walking, calling back to Folrig, “If a squir-relbabe could defeat the searats they shouldnt be too tough for us. Besides, you two

could panic them with your faces. Hahaha!

The following two days passed uneventfully; the going was not too difficult, the weather fine, and food plentiful. Toward evening of the second day, the travelers found themselves scaling some very steep wooded hills, each one seemingly higher than the last. Amid the stunted trees and shrubs of the final rocky tor, Sunflash called a halt. In the last rays of daylight he noticed a faint westerly gleam on the horizon.

“Aha, its the sea at last, my pretty ones! he cried.

Ruddle was still panting as he lit a small sheltered fire. “Well aint that nice, clamberin up all them ills so ole stri-peyooter can see the water!

“Huh, ills ysay, matey? If they was ills Im an owls uncle, said Folrig, unpacking supper from the haversacks. “Its mountains weve been climbin, bucko, an none big-gern the one were atop of right now!

Sunflash chuckled at his two companions. “Well at least we dont have to climb any higher, itll be all downhill tomorrow, or should I say downmountain. Come on, you two frogfaces, dig out those turnipnmushroom pasties.

Supper was laid on green twigs to warm over the fire. Ruddle dribbled honey onto three thick fruitcake slices, while Sun-flash poured out beakers of cold cider.

They lay round the fire eating supper, enjoying the faint breeze. Folrig winked coaxingly at Ruddle. “I votes you take first watch, matey, yore the ugliest.

Ruddle made as if to rise, then slumped back, saying, “First one cant solve a riddle takes first watch. What goes up an up an up an never leaves the ground?

Folrig answered without batting an eyelid, “This pesky mountain were on, thats an old un. Er, er, whats under the water an over the water an never gets wet?

Sunflash licked honey from his paws as he answered, “An egg inside a ducks tummy, even I know that one! Righto, what falls every day and breaks every night?

Ruddle sniffed. “Huh, dusk an dawn, what else? What goes buhurr owch! Buhurr owch! See if yknow thatn.

“Two moles fightin over a damson pudden.

Ruddle glared at Folrig. “How did you know?

“Well I should know, matey,twas me that made it up!

They fell to wrestling and insulting each other until Sunflash pulled them apart. “Stop this fighting, you two, Ill go first watch.

Suddenly Folrig and Ruddle wanted to take first watch.

“No, no, matey, Ill go watch.

“Oh no ywont, I will.

Sunflash tossed his mace from paw to paw menacingly. “I said Ill go first watch. Anybeast care to argue?

The two otters threw themselves flat, eyes closed tight.

“Cant ear yer, mate, Im fast asleep.

“Me too, needs me beauty sleep, I do.

Chuckling quietly at the irrepressible creatures, Sunflash strode softly off around the edges of their camp. He settled on a boulder from where he had a good view all round.

The early part of the night was uneventful. Sunflash stayed alert, enjoying the silence of the balmy darkness. He sat thinking of his friend Skarlath and the happy seasons they had spent with the Bruff Dubbo and Tirry Lingl families at the cave. Intermingled with these thoughts were the dreams of his family: father, mother, and grandsires, and of course, the mountain, always the mountain, waiting for him somewhere in the southwest. The campfire had gradually reduced to embers and gone dead; there was no moon, only the wide star-strewn darkness above. Gradually, little by little, the badger fell under the soft spell of nights mantle. His eyes began to droop, and small sounds receded into the background, merging into a faint, comforting whisper.

Then a weighted net was flung over Sunflash, pulling him backward off the boulder. Before he had a chance to break loose or lift his mace, the badger felt cold steel at his throat, at least a dozen sword or knife points. A gruff voice grated in his ear. “One move an youre a deadbeast!

The net tightened as stakes were driven through it into the ground.

“Munga, are those two others taken care of? the gruff voice called out.

A reply came back out of the darkness: “Out cold, the pair of em, Chief!

Sunflash began to struggle against the confining net. A sword point pricked him under the chin and a higher-pitched voice grated angrily: “Let me finish him off, Chief!

14?

Shang Damsontongue was even easier to deal with than Bow-fleg had been. Swartt Sixclaw promised her joint leadership of the horde, plus many fine metal weapons, and she was eager and greedy. They sealed the bargain with fine wine from the south, Swartt drinking from the bottle and allowing his new partner the honor of drinking from the poisoned silver chalice. The sixclawed Warlord could scarce suppress an evil snigger. Would they never learn, these so-called leaders, that none was more deadly and pitiless than he?

Once again he was Warlord of all the great horde. Shangs former band of foxes was only too happy to follow Swartt; issued with good metal weapons to take the place of their former crude arms, regaled with promises of lavish booty to come, they joined gladly. But Swartt had not reckoned with Balefur!

The big dogfox had been only loosely attached to Shang Damsontongues band. He was more of a lonertough, independent, and fearless, Balefur answered to nobeast. Swartt had noticed him as the march southwest had continued, standing out, bigger than the rest, striding confidently, neither asking nor giving help to anybeast. Moreover, Balefur had armed himself with a large double-headed battleaxe, and he carried it with the easy grace of one who knew how to use it.

On the second nights camp, Swartt decided to meet with the big fox. Being one of the few left with a tent, the Warlord had it set up, guards posted around it, and a fire burning outside. Cushions were scattered around inside, and Swartts wife, Bluefen, set out a good array of food and drink. The Warlord was out to impress any potential friend or enemy with a show of splendor and power.

Four armed vermin were sent to bring the fox into Swartts presence, but from the start the interview went badly. Balefur sauntered in, battleaxe slung nonchalantly across his shoulder, completely ignoring the four guards around him. He winked casually at Swartt and leaned up against the tent post.

Swartt studied his guest before speaking, then he crooked a claw at Aggal the stoat Captain. “Aggal, relieve our friend of that great heavy weapon.

Balefur toted the axe, shaking his head at the Captain. “Nay, laddie, thiss mah weapon, nobeast takes et from me, dye ken? He laughed openly at the hesitant Aggaf. “Besides, ets no heavy, ah kin wield et wi nay fuss!

Taking a quick pace forward, Balefur swung the axe in a swift arc. Aggal jumped backward, but not before the axeblade had sheared through his sword belt. The fox picked up the severed belt and sheathed sword lightly on his double-headed axe and tossed it to the speechless Captain.

“Och, yer no hurt, stoat. If ah was aimin tslay ye theyd be buryin ye in two pieces now!

Swartt got up from his chair; striding forward he faced the fox imperiously. “I am Swartt Sixclaw, Warlord of this horde!

Balefur looked away insolently as if dismissing him. “Aye, so ahve heard, what else is new, ferret?

Swartt fought inwardly to control his rising anger. “So youre Balefur, I can tell by your speech that yer from the far northlands. How did yget this far south?

The fox shrugged, smiling patronizingly at me Warlord. “Och, thats a long story, but nae doubt ah 11 be goin farther a bit wi ye, if were tbetieve all yer talk o great booty an mighty plunder.

Knowing the fox was getting the better of the confrontation, Swartt decided to change his tack. He smiled and clapped the big beasts back, saying, “I like you, mate, yer a beast after me own heart. Howd ylike to be a horde Captain in my army?

Balefur chuckled, shaking his head. “Not fer me, polecat, ahll leave that tae the wee beasties who like tdress up an play soldiers. Mah business is takin care o maself, not lookin after otherbeasts.

Seething inwardly, Swartt pasted a smile on his face. “Dont take or give orders, eh, a good idea. Come sit with me, Balefur, lets eatndrink together, friend.

The big fox laughed openly.

“Yer a canny creature, Swartt, ye drink from the bottle an ah drink from the silver cup, eh? Is that what yer thinkin? Well etll no work, ah ate an drank afore ah came here an ahm off tae take mah rest now, so

ahll bid ye good night.

Without waiting permission from the Warlord, Balefur shouldered his battleaxe and strode off.

When Balefur had left, Swartt leapt at one of the guards ! standing nearby and felled him with a mighty blow from his mailed paw.

“There! Thatll give yer somethin to smile about! Anybeast want some of this, speak up an Ill give it to yer!

At a nod from Nightshade, the guards and Captains hurriedly left the tent. The vixen hovered behind Swartts chair. “That one is dangerous, Lord, he knows we poisoned Shang Damsontongue. But we will have to be careful. Balefur is much admired within your horde; we will watch and wait.

Swartt gritted his teeth until his jaw ached. “Id like to finish the blaggard tonight, while hes sleepin!

“Twould not be easy, Lord, he is a northlander, experienced in the art of battle. Twould be no simple task to slay that one. If you missed then you would be made to look foolish in front of the horde.

Swartt studied his six-clawed paw in its metal gauntlet, and said, “I suppose youre right, vixen, well watch an wait. Nothing must happen tmake me look foolish in front of my horde. I want you tgo ahead and scout the land for three days. Make sure were on the right course, I dont want them mut-terin that were lost again, Balefurd just love that. Travel alone and let nobeast know where youre goin, dye hear?

Nightshade stuffed provisions in a sack. “Ill go now. Dont worry too much about Balefur, he does not figure in your fate, Lord.

Swartt drew his curved sword and tested its edge. “No, but Ill figure in his fate sure enough. Theres more ways of shell-in an acorn than hittin it with a rock. Go now.

The following days were not easy for Swartt. Tales, enlarged by rumor, had spread through the horde, telling of his encounter with the fox Balefur. The stories grew more fantastic as they passed from one to another.

“I tell yer, mate, Swartts terrified of ole Balefur.

“Who told yer that?

“One of the guards who was in the tent, e said that Balefur chopped Swartts belt in pieces with that battleaxe of is.

“So, what did Sixclaw do about that?

“Never did a thing, jus stood there tremblin, then Balefur goes an lays Capn Aggal out with a single blow.

“It mustve been a good blow, that Aggals a tough un!

“Hah, none of em are as tough as the fox. Ave yer seen the size of im? I wouldnt like to chance me paw with that un!

“Me neither, not if e did wot you said.

“Well e did it, true as I stanere. Ill wager that ole Bale-furll be leadin this orde afore long.

Swartt could hear the murmurs; he heard the stifled chuckles also, though he could never identify the culprits from out of the marching horde. Luckily the going was easy, over copse-dotted grasslands crisscrossed by small gurgling streams. Alone in his tent at nights, the Warlord noticed that his Captains were hardly bothering to come in and report at the end of each day. When he slept his dreams were visited by visions of the badger Sunflash. Each morn he would wake, and the one thing driving him on, even in his present precarious position, was to slay his enemy, the badger who had ruined his sixclawed paw.

Balefur, however, was enjoying his notoriety and courting popularity with his admirers. There were a great number of hordebeasts who favored the big fox; some were only too glad to serve him food, erect a tent for his use, and obey his whims. The horde Captains were plainly frightened of him, and Bale-fur took every opportunity to belittle them by making sideswipes at their authority. His prowess with the battleaxe was becoming something of a legend around the campfires. Often he would chop an officers spear handle in two pieces and pretend it was an accident.

“Whoops! Sorry about (hat, laddie, ye mustve stepped in mah way jist as ah was practicin, still, nae harm done, eh?

Some days he would deliberately hold about half of the horde back by taking a rest in mid-march. He would sit at the edge of a stream, bathing his paws and calling out so that Swartt could hear every word clearly, “Och, ye march on wi1 yer badger-chasin, well catch ye up by

nightfall, mebbe!

Grim-faced and silent, the Warlord marched onward, afraid to challenge Balefurs easygoing insolence in case he lost to the fox, yet knowing that while the challenge remained unanswered, he was losing the respect of both horde and Captains. It was a dilemma he would have to face sooner or later.

It was in the dark of a moonless night when the vixen returned. The Warlord sprang up from the cushions where he had lain sleepless through the long hours. “Where in the name of furnblood have you been all this time, vixen? Make yer report, an it better be good!

It was good. Swartts agile mind weighed up the possibilities as Nightshade explained what she had found.

“Lord, you are marching south now, and have been for the last few days, but no matter. Two days from here a great river runs to the west. If we follow it to the shores of the sea, then we only have to go due south.

Swartt nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes, ydid well, vixen, we wont get lost followin a river. But theres somethin else youve seen, I know there is! Tell me.

Nightshade leaned close, her voice low, relishing the role of conspirator. “A little way east before I found the river, I discovered two old stoat hags living not far from a great hole in the ground, a quarry they called it. Funny thing though, these two old ragbags of stoats, they were living in a hovel made of grass sods, but it was ringed about by many thick ropes lying flat on the ground....

“Thick ropes on the ground, what for? Swartt interrupted.

“I asked them that very question, Lord. They told me it was because of the snakesthey said that serpents wont cross over a rope laid flat on earth....

Swartt stared hard at the vixen in the gloom of the tent. “Snakes! How many snakes were they tafkin about?

“They said a great nest of adders live down in the quarry, where the stone is dry and sandy in places. I stood at the edge of the quarry with them and they showed me the entrance holes to the serpents lair. Anybeast going into one of those holes would meet a horrible death for certain.

Swartt scratched his painted chin thoughtfully. “A great hole in the ground full of snakes, eh? I wonder how they got there.

There was disbelief in Nightshades voice as she explained. “Those two old hags said that the quarry was made by many mice, squirrels, moles, and woodland creatures, who needed the red sandstone to build. When they left, the snakes took it over. I think those two stoat hags are as crazy as weed-fed frogs!

Swartt waved her to silence with his mailed paw. “Never mind all that, if the hole in the ground is there and full of serpents as they say it is, then Ive got a great idea. Listen carefully now, I want no slipups!

15

The following day was light and breezy. Patches of sun and shade stippled the grasslands as Swartt stood on a small knoll, his face and teeth freshly painted, cloak swirling on the wind. The Warlords tone had a fresh ring of confidence as he addressed the horde in a loud voice: “Ive been travelin due south because I know a great river runs west not two days from here. Well march to that river and follow it west, and if we make it to the river in good time, Ill allow you a couple of days rest, eatin, sleepin, and doin what you like. Now break camp and lets move!

A half-hearted cheer went up, but most of the horde did not seem in any hurry to march. From somewhere in the center of the horde, Balefurs voice could be heard clearly. “All those who want tae chase badgers, follow the ferret!

“If you think Swartt Sixclaw came all this way just to chase a badger, then youre slow in the head, fox.

Balefur stared at Nightshade curiously. “What makes ye say that, do ye ken somethin I dont?

Nightshade smiled craftily, tapping her muzzle with one paw. “I know more about Swartt Sixclaw than any beast living. Dont you believe hes down here on a badger hunt. Follow me if you want to know the real truth.

Balefur followed the vixen as she picked her way through the vermin throng until the two of them stood alone in an ash grove. She sat and patted the grass indicating that Balefur join her. The fox inspected the area, then sat in a place of his own choosing, back against a tree, axe lying close to paw. “Ye dinna fool me, lassie, he said, “ah know ye tbe Swartts creature.

Nightshades eyes were bitter and her voice shook as she answered, “For too many seasons, my friend, but now Im sick of being treated like a pawragvixen do this, vixen do that, fetch, carry, yes Lord, no Lord.

Balefur smiled as he toyed with the axe haft. “Och, then what changed yer mind all o a sudden?

Nightshade leaned forward and grasped his paw. “You did! Swartts

afraid of you, its plain to see his days as Warlord are numbered. I want to be on the winners side. Everybeast knows you are the next horde leader!

Balefur pursed his lips shrewdly. “Tell me more, ahm be-ginnin tae like the sound o this.

Nightshades voice held an undercurrent of greed and excitement. “The badger story is just a ruse. Swartt wants power and wealth. The position of Warlord is his power, but the wealth lies hidden southeast of here. Searats sailed up the great river long seasons ago and hid their treasure in a secret place!

The big fox immediately became very attentive. “Aha! Treasure ye saywhere?

“Only Swartt and I know. We fought the searats and slew them many seasons ago on the east coast. Before their Captain died we squeezed the location of the loot out of him. However, I know now that Swartt has grown too powerful to share any loot with me. What Im looking for is somebeast I can trust, a fox like myself to share both the treasure and command of the horde.

Balefur spat upon his paw and held it out. “Play me false an Ill gut ye, but take my paw, tell me where yon treasure lies, an yeve got a bargain. I give ye my word, lassie!

Nightshade spat on her paw and joined it with the big foxs.

“Fox and fox together act,

Heres my paw and heres my pact!

“Right, when we reach the river, Swartt is giving the horde a couple of days rest, thats so he can slide off and get the loot. He wants the horde to move west, but if you follow the river east and come back north a bit, youll see a great hole scooped out of the earth, a quarry. That is where the treasure lies. Go carefully, and avoid an old sod dwelling where two stoat hags live. They act as sentries for the treasure, guarding the quarry. Those old hags are dangerous, they have knowledge of great spells, magic, and poisons. Keep away from them, and enter the quarry secretly from the opposite side of their dwelling. You will find many holes low-down in the pitfacechoose the biggest. Follow down the hole, it is a tunnel, and at the end of it you will find the treasure if you dig straight down. Take two trusty friends with you to carry it back, for it is a great hoard that took the searats many,

many seasons to steal and plunder. They say there is a great jeweled axe made from gold there, bigger even than the one you carry.

Though Balefurs eyes shone covetously at the thought of such riches, still he asked the question, “An whatll ye be doin whilst ahm gettin yon booty?

The vixen nodded approvingly. “Good, I thought youd ask that! Ill be convincing Swartt that youve deserted with a couple of your mates; meanwhile Ill be slipping a potion in his food thatll weaken him a bit. No sense in taking stupid risks. Then when you challenge him for the leadership youll be sure to win. Now get going, take two of your foxes with you. If you leave now youll set paws on the treasure a full day before we arrive at the river. Ill meet you at the cave to split the spoils.

Balefur called back as he ran off toward the moving horde, “Ahm glad tae have ye as a friend an not a foe, Nightshade!

The vixen smiled and waved, knowing she was linked by destiny to serve only one. The Warlord Swartt Sixclaw!

Balefur chose two dogfoxes, young and completely in awe and admiration of him. Without telling them too much, he shepherded them away from the marching horde, and they slipped off south and slightly east, away from the main body.

Swartt was joined by the vixen as they forded a small brook. 4 Well, did our big-mouthed fish take the bait? he asked.

The vixen scooped up a pawful of water and sipped lightly. “Hook, line, and sinker, Lord; it was like telling a hungry ratbabe where cook hid the apple pie.

There was no breeze that night. It started to rain, with a slight nimble of thunder from the west getting closer. Balefur had traveled hard and fast, the two foxes panting to keep up with him. Completely drenched, they halted on a hill of shale and scree overlooking the quarry. Lightning crackled from the sky, illuminating the huge pit scooped out of the earth. Wiping rainwater from his eyes, one of the foxes stood back a bit from the edge, saying, “It looks too scary, I dont like it!

One hard prod from the battleaxe haft left him sprawling and nursing aching ribs. The big fox snarled contemptuously. “Ahm no bothered whether ye like et or no, laddie buck, up on yer paws now. Look down yonder, ye two, when lightnin1 flashes again, then tell me if ye see a

big hole in the quarry-side.

Thunder boomed and a bolt of lightning cut the wet night sky.

“Aye, there it is, just off tthe left, see!

It was clear enough; all three saw it at once. There was a series of small holes, but one larger than the rest stood out like a great dark mouth, gaping wide. Balefur pushed the two young foxes ahead of him. “Shift yersels, mates, thats where were bound!

Still rubbing his ribs, the young fox protested, “We could do with a lighted torch to see the way....

Balefurs claws dug into neck scruff as he shook the protestor. “Are ye daft, laddie, wheres dry wood tae be found? Ahve flint an tinder wi me, dye want me tae dry yer tail out an set a light to et, eh? Now move yersels!

The lightning became more frequent, and their descent to the quarry floor was unpleasantly rapid as they skidded and slipped over rain-slicked stone and through patches of wet clay. Muzzle over brush they landed, soaked and dizzy on the quarry floor. Suddenly lit by lightning, the whole place looked unreal, a crater of banded pink and red stone enveloped by lancing rain. Balefur shouldered his axe, saying, “Keep those wide daggers close, yell be needin em to dig.

“To dig? What for, Balefur?

“Ach, never ye mind. Come onwe havent all night!

The hole entrance loomed dark and forbidding, but before either of the foxes could hesitate, Balefur had pushed them inside with his axe shaft. Once in, it was surprisingly dry and silent, and they took a moment to shake and wipe rainwater from their faces and paws.

“Och well, at least tis warm an dry, the big fox remarked cheerfully. “If ye feel anythin around thatll do fer a torch, let me know an well light one.

One of the two foxes sniffed the air and shuddered. “Ugh! Whats that smell? Its awful!

Balefur sniffed several times before pronouncing, “Ah dont know what et is, but mind, laddie, anyplace searats have been is bound tae stink a bit. Right, hang on to mah tail, yer pal can hang on to yers. Follow

me.

The moment Balefur began to suspect that all was not right was when the tunnel took several twists and turns. Attempting to find his way back through the total darkness to their original entrance, he found himself caught up in a maze of chambers, cross tunnels, and dead ends. The two young foxes began whimpering.

“L ... lets get out of here, Im scared!

“Aye, we should never have left the horde!

Using his free paw, the big fox cuffed about in the darkness until he had soundly buffeted them both. “Shuttit! Dye hear me, belt up, yer snivelin gobs!

They went quiet. Balefur squatted in the darkness, trying to get his bearings, then he heard the noise.

Flip ... Plop ... Flip ... Plop!

“Hear that, et might be the rains stopped antis drippin from the rocks. Sounds like ets up ahead, right, lets go!

As they groped their way farther along the passage, one of the foxes yelled joyfully, “Light ahead, look!

Sure enough, there was a pale light to be seen dimly ahead. They dashed toward it, tripping, stumbling, and shouting, “It must be moonlight. Ill bet the rains stopped!

It was a cavern, a vast, high-ceilinged chamber in the nat-ural rock. Limestone stalactites and stalagmites could be seen everywhere, some of them reflected in the pale green luminous tight given off by a massive pond in the center of the cavern. The three foxes stood disappointed but spellbound at the glowing scene before them. The smell grew strongersweet, dry, cloying. Balefur had caught that odor before on the battlegrounds of the northlands. It was the scent of death!

Sss sssssssssssttttttt!

It started gradually until the whole chamber echoed to the sinister hissing noise. Then they saw the snakes. Every exit from that dreaded place was blocked by them: adders, writhing and hissing, baring fangs as they slithered forward. Scaly, cold-eyed, oliveand black-chevroned

reptiles; long, short, thick, fat, poison, toothed and sinuously evil. Rearing, bunching and swaying, they came. Balefur had never witnessed anything like it, not even in his worst nightmare. The battleaxe slid from his nerveless paws as he felt himself fixed by a thousand hypnotic eyes. One of the foxes at his side screamed and threw himself into the pool.

“Eeeeyaaaaagh!

There were only ripples on top of the bottomless pool to show where he had broken the icy surface, and a dark shape could be traced for several moments going down ... down ... down!

Then, without a sound, their faces frozen masks of terror, eyes and mouths wide open, Balefur and the remaining fox slid silently into the rustling, many-coiled embrace of the serpents of the cavern.

16?

As the metal point broke the skin under Sunflashs chin, he felt its holder knocked aside and the weapon wrenched away. Then a gruff older voice growled, “Let it be, Gring, this is too big for a searat. Musko, make a light and bring it here. Lets see what weve caught!

Flint struck metal and a torch was lit. A raggy-furred shrew wearing a colored headband pointed his small rapier at Sun-fiash. “This aint no searat, comrades, thiss a badger, a big un, too!

Sunflash began pawing the net aside, angry at being caught napping. The fixing stakes flew from the ground as he stood. “Huh! I thought you lot were the searats. If youve harmed those two otters Ill make you sorry you were born!

A young shrew ran forward threateningly, sword drawn. “I dont trust this one, he could be with the searats. Kill him!

The older shrew neatly tripped the young one, then, relieving him of his sword, he thwacked him smartly across the rump with the flat of the blade. “Thats enough out of you, Gring. Im Log a Log round here. Ill say who gets slain and who gets spared. Now behave yourself!

Turning to Sunflash, the shrew leader made a brief salute with the sword. “Sorry about that, friend. Hi, Munga, how are those otters?

The reply came back with a deep bass chuckle. “Comin round fine, Chief. Its those two thick-skulled uglies Folrig an Ruddlegood job we only sandbagged em!

A small fire was lit on the lee side of a protruding rock. The otters rubbed their heads as they sat around with Sunflash, Log a Log, and some older shrews.

Ruddle introduced Sunflash to the shrews, wincing as he touched a bump between his ears. “Its a season or two since our paths crossed, matey. Whatre you shrews doin up in these high hills?

Log a Log pointed in the seaward direction. “Taking a shortcut to head Warpclaw an his searais off. We were off clearin a dam from the broadstream few days back, and when we got home to our camp that villain Warpclaw had sailed his ship Gutprow clean up our river from the sea an carried the liddle ones off for galley slaves. The old ones

managed to run off an hidewhat else could they do?

Sunflash thought of the Lingl and Dubbo babes, and a wave of anger swept over him against the searats for stealing little ones.

“How many babes were taken, Log a Log? he asked.

“Thirty an four tbe exact... Log a Log stopped mid-sentence. For a moment his eyes filled with pain. “And that includes my own little daughter, barely more than a season old.

Sunfiash picked up his mace. “Come on then, theres no time to be lost. Were with you!

The shrews gaped open-mouthed as the huge badger went pounding off down the steep slopes toward the distant shore. They were amazed at his agility and strength. Where he could not climb he took great leaps, where it was too steep to walk he threw himself into a roll, and any rock or hindrance that barred his way was pulverized beneath the mighty mace.

Folrig and Ruddle bounded after him, calling to the shrews in their wake, “Sunflashll get yore liddle ugly mugs back if anybeast will! Hoho, bet yore glad tbe on the same side as this badger!

They made the beach an hour after dawn. Sunflash gathered them behind a rocky outcrop from where they could see the broadstream flow across the shore and into the sea. Folding a leaf, he began blowing a high-pitched signal.

Log a Log looked at him strangely. “Whatre you doing, friend?

Sunflash stopped blowing. “Just a chance a friend of mine might be around. Right, we need a plan. You otters, swim upstream and see if you can sight the searat ship coming this way. Log a Log, have you got any ideas how we can slow them down or stop them from reaching the sea?

The shrew Chieftain scratched his scrubby chin as he gazed out over the beach; then he pointed to one spot. “See there, fliats where the sand forms in a bump on the tideline. The river flows shallowest over that part. Musko, Floom, go an check it out for depth.

The two shrews dashed out to the spot and plunged into the water. A moment later they were out and running back, dripping. “Neck high, Chief, just about neck high!

Log a Log turned to Sunflash. “That should be enough. How strong are you, friend?

Sunflash shrugged. “Strong enough. Tell me what you want Die to do, and well see how strong I am.

Captain Warpclaw of the slaveship Gutprow was a true Corsair searat, tattooed from face to claws, decked out in tattered silks and brass earrings, with a broad scimitar thrust in his waistband. He stood perched on the stem behind the tiller rat, leering down at the huddle of terrified shrewbabes crowding together around the mast pole in the shade of Gutprow& huge single green sail. The dull-eyed slaves chained at the oar banks pulled steadily, keeping their faces down. They pitied the young captives, who would be condemned, like them, to a life at the oars of some piratical galley, but they were afraid to offer them any comfort.

Warpclaw ducked his head and, breaking a green twig from an alder tree as it brushed the ships side, he fanned himself with the leafy twig, breathing deep of the good morning air. He was in a rare good mood, happy to be sailing seaward after a successful raid that had netted him a good cargo of young ones from the shrew settlement upstream. Warpclaw called up to the lookout high on the masthead, “Ahoy, Bilgesnout, any sign o blue water yet?

“Not yet, Capn, mayap well catch a glim o the sea round the next bendcant be far now!

Warpclaw stalked down the steps from the stern into the midship well. Turning to a fat-bellied stoat who wore a broad leather belt and carried a braided sinew whip, he said, “Too fair a mornin tbe dawdlin, Bulgom! Tickle yer rowers up a bit, lets see a turn o speed out o this craft.

Grinning cheerfully through a mouthful of blackened and broken teeth, the stoat cracked his long whip across the naked backs of the rowers. Painfully they increased their oar strokes under the vicious swish and crack of Bulgorns lash. The shrewbabes had to crouch low to avoid being hit by the whips backlash; they whimpered and squeaked with fear.

Warpclaw was having fun. He leapt down among them and, thrusting his,face forward, he snarled cruelly, “Yahaharr, me liddle beauties, Ill ave yer guts for ratlines if I ears one more moan out of ye!

The little shrews went into a terrified silence, clinging pitifully to each

other. They were still not fully aware of the horrors that awaited them on the open seas.

Bellowing orders, the searat Captain livened his crew up as the ship rounded a bend in the broad stream. “Haul in them fenders! Make fast yer mainsail ends! Lookout, where away the sea now?

The rat lookout leaned out from his perch, shading his eyes with a paw as he called back smartly, “Main dead ahead, Capn, I kin see the sun on the water atwixt these rocksntrees now!

Folrig and Ruddle had been watching the slave ship from a safe distance for some time. Shooting ahead like twin arrows through the broadstream waters, the two otters outswam even the small fish as they sped toward the shore. Sleek and shining from the water, they arrived safely at the hideaway behind the rocks at the beach edge.

“Hearken, mates, the searat vessel aint far behind us, said Ruddle. “Whatve you been up to, ole goldie nose?

Log a Log shook his head as if in disbelief as he patted the badgers sturdy shoulder. “This beast has carried two great boulders that a score of shrews couldnt budge. See over there where the sand humps up at the tideline? Sunflash dumped those boulders in the water right at that spot. I tell you, no ship11 be able to pass them an make it to the open sea.

Sunflash took out his split leaf and blew one last loud call with it. He shrugged as the shrews and otters stared at him curiously. “Its worth one last try, though I cant risk that noise again. Maybe he heard it; then again, he might be too far away.

Log a Log shook his head; he was not about to start asking silly questions at a time like this. The big badgers business was his own, no explanations asked.

Cool shrewbeer, oat bread, and cheese were passed around, and they ate as swords were given a last edge upon the rock surfaces, and slings were loaded with flat, heavy pebbles. Sun-flash tightened the mace cord around his paw, and all was ready.

As the Gutprow came clear of the rocks to the open shore, the broadstream ran slightly more shallow. The oar slaves were made to stand and punt with their long paddles, digging them into the sandy shallows to push the vessel along. Warpclaw was jubilant at the prospect of the high seas in front of him after a trouble-free raid. A

fair breeze from the east bellied the big single mainsail, hurrying the ship across the shoreline toward the white-flecked main.

The searat Captain ran forard and, standing with his back to the bowsprit, he faced the crew. He waved his scimitar and roared, “Ahoy, buckoes, whos the best Capn on land or sea?

They cheered and shouted his name. “Capn Warpclaw!

Sunlight glittered and twinkled on his brass ornaments and shining scimitar as Warpclaw threw wide his paws triumphantly.

Whump!

The searat was thrown flat on his back as the ship stopped dead. Two crewrats sitting on the after gallery were shot backward into the water, and the oar slaves fell sideways like a load of tenpins. A stricken-faced lookout came sliding down a rope and shot past Warpclaw, who was staggering upright and rubbing at the back of his skull with both paws.

The lookout hung over the bows, yelling, “Shes trapped ead on atwixt two dirty great rocks! They wasnt ere when we sailed up this way! Eeeeyyaaarrgg!

With a hefty kick from Warpclaw, the lookout went straight over into the water. Still massaging his aching head, the Corsair looked over at the spluttering rat in the water. “Gutsn-tripes! Who stuck them there? he snarled. “Give the babes back, seascum!

Warpclaw whirled around. Sunflash was striding across the beach, flanked by the two otters and backed by sixty shrews. The badgers voice was like thunder as he hefted his mace.

“I wont tell you twice, rat! Deliver those little ones back. Now!

Warpclaw was a quick thinker. Forgetting his throbbing , head, he leapt down amidships and came up with a shrewbabe, then, holding the tiny creature upside down by a single foot-paw, the searat pulled out his scimitar and swung it aloft. “Stop right there or Ill slay thisn! he bellowed. Sunflash and the rescuers ground to an immediate halt. The badger pointed with his mace at the wriggling, weeping babe. “I warn you, rat, touch one hair of him and youll die!

Warpclaw knew it was a standoff, but he had the upper paw. “Shift those boulders or Ill kill em all, every last one!

The crew of Gutprow sprang to arms; suddenly the rails bristled with armed vermin. Log a Log looked at the two ot-; ters, despair stamped on his scrubby face. ; Warpclaw chuckled; he knew how soft woodlanders were about their young. “Well, stripedog, you look big enough. Are yer goin to move the rocks?

Sunflash could not stop his voice trembling as he answered, : “Give the babes back and Til free your ship. ; The Corsair knew he had won. Drawing the scimitar farther back, as if ready to chop, he called down to the badger, “Tell i yer wot Ill do. Well call this liddle maggot number one, then Ill keep slicinem until you move those rocks!

The wide blade glittered in the sun as he swung at the babe.

“ Kreeeegaaaaaar!

Skarlath hit the searat like a thunderbolt from out of the sky! One set of talons buried itself in the swordpaw while the other took Warpclaw round his throat. He fell backward, dropping the babe into the water. Then Sunflash the Mace was aboard the ship in a flash, bloodwrath of the Badger Warrior Lords rilling his eyes.

Skarlath knew what was about to happen; he was powerless to stop it. Seeing the shackle that connected the slave chain, he wrenched at it madly until it clattered free, then he shrieked at the oar slaves, “Kreeeh! Grab those little ones! Get clear of this ship!

One paw at his throat, the other scrabbling for his scimitar, Warpclaw rasped hoarsely at the crew of the Gutprow, “Kill the badger, rip im, tear im to shreds!

As the crew advanced on Sunflash, the oar slaves splashed overboard, clutching the yelling shrewbabes.

Skarlath swooped down beside Log a Log as the babes and their rescuers were hauled from the water. “Kreeeh! Stay clear of the ship!

A blood-chilling roar rang out from the deck.

“Eeulaliaaaaaaaa!

Log a Log drew his rapier, saying, “But we must help him!

The kestrel knocked the blade from his paw. “If you value your lives, stay clear of the ship, all of you! The sight of that rat nearly slaying the little one has set off the bloodwrath in him; Sunflash is berserk! I

have seen it before, though never like this. He will slay anybeast in his path, he is a Badger Lord. Stay clear, I beg of you!

The gathering on the shore stood in shocked silence as roars, screams, and chaos echoed from the Gutprow. Sunflash the Mace was visiting death upon the searats who had stolen babes from the shrews.

17

With his back against the mast, Sunflash faced the searats six at a time. Daggers stabbed, blades slashed, but nought could stand before him. The mace swung and fell, whirling in arcs, sweeping like a scythe, smashing like a sledgehammer. The searats fought back with desperation, but their swords snapped like twigs as the Badger Warrior wielded his mace so fast that it was hard for the eye to follow. His speed and strength were unmatched.

Onshore, the shrews covered their babes eyes and ears as they looked away from the swaying vessel. The oar slaves, however, stood watching, grim satisfaction stamped on their thin faces. The vermin of the waves were being paid back in full for every lash mark, every chain scar, every day of near-starvation, every night they had separated the oar slaves from their loved ones. An old squirrel raised a clenched paw and shook it at the hated Gutprow, crying, “Let them reap the whirlwind they have brought upon their own evil heads!

Not one searat or wave vermin left the ship alive. When his terrible task was at an end, Sunflash let slip the mace from his paws and fell down in a stupor by the mast. Folrig, Ruddle, and Skarlath had long since herded the shrews back behind the rocks at the shores edge, where they ate and stayed resting until sunsets scariet fires began lighting the horizon. Then the kestrel flew out over the silent ship.

Sunflash was awakened by the lonely cry of seabirds. Lowering himself over the ships side, he washed all traces of battle from his body and cleaned off his mace in the cold water. The badgers eyes were normal now, back to their usual mild, dark-brown hue.

Skarlath landed nearby and watched as Sunflash took his jpnace and smashed two gaping holes in the Gutprow, one each ; side, amidships, just above the waterline. Placing his mace to one side, he waded into the broadstream and, bending his back and grunting with exertion, he loosened the two boulders from the streambed and rolled them ashore. The water had been building up behind the vessel, and now that it was free of the restraining boulders, the ship sprang clear. Night winds caught the sail, billowing it out; the Gutprow was off on its last voyage.

Sunflash sat down on the sand beside Skarlath, his shoulders wearily, saying, “She will sail out into deep waters until the waves find those

holes; then she will go to the bottom.

A great fire was lit on the beach; shrews sat round it with eir backs to the rocks, and a cauldron of soup made from iratershrimp, herbs, and leeks bubbled away merrily. Bread and cheese was shared, shrewbeer was poured, with blackberry iial for the little ones.

Sunflash sat alone, apart from the festivities. Log a Log brought him food and said, “Lord Sunflash, we of the Guosim thank you. Words do not come easily to show our gratitude for what you have done for us, but our hearts are full for you. The name Sunflash will live for ever with the Guosim.

The badger echoed the curious word: “Guosim?

Log a Log explained. “Guerrilla Union of Shrews in Moss-flower, first letter of each word. We are warriors, we honor you!

Sunflash nodded his thanks, but still he sat alone, knowing the first real feelings of being a Badger Lord, fearing his own bloodwrath, shuddering at the sight he had been granted of his own dark side.

Skarlath sat perched by the fire, watching Sunflash from a distance. The shrewbabes were too excited to sleep; they played and danced, laughed and sang with boundless energy. The kestrel knew how little ones affected his friend, so he called them over. “Poor old Mr. Sunflash, doesnt he look sad, he said. “Why dont you go and say thank you to him for saving you from the searats? Go on, maybe hed like to play with you!

When the little shrews had run off to Sunflash and there was peace around the fire, two shrewmaids began singing. One of them played a small stringed instrument not unlike a mandolin. It had a sweet, tinkling tone, and to it they sang a ballad that they had written that very day, a song that would become a great favorite around shrew campfires for countless seasons to come.

“Oh, twas all in the summertime,

Our hearts did sadly grieve,

The searats stole up in the night,

And with our babes did leave.

Full four and thirty little shrews

Were taken to be slaves,

To live in misery or refuse

And die in watery graves.

But then a mighty warrior

Did come along our way;

We knew what fate had sent him for,

When these words he did say:

Come follow me down to the sea.

Across the mountain track,

And I will set your young ones free;

Ill bring those babies back.

And then with mighty chunks of rock,

He dammed the great broadstream

And gave those foul searats a shock,

Which caused them all to scream.

He came with death held in his paw,

Which no rat born could face.

Oh woe to those who break the law,

Of Sunflash and his mace.

Take warning all you bold searats,

Who plough the raging main,

Steal not our babes, and come not near

Our peaceful shores again,

For fear you meet the Badger Lord,

He of the gold-marked face,

For youll meet death once you have met

The Warrior with the Mace.

Folrig raised his beaker in admiration. “Heres to a great ballad sung well by pretty maids!

Ruddle and Log a Log were chuckling. The shrew pointed and said. “Aye, look, here comes a big babe playing with little babes.

There were six shrewbabes riding on Sunflashs back as he ambled up and shook them off, then collapsed on the sand, begging, “Enough, enough! Id sooner do battle with ten shiploads of villains than fight you lot off!

Another group arrived panting, dragging the mace along the sand by its corded handle. A plump, serious-faced infant held up a pebble in one paw and addressed Log a Log. “See dis peggle, I make it get stucked inna star, watch!

Smiling broadly, Sunflash picked up his mace and held it like a bat, calling to the infant, “One, two, three. Now!

The little shrew flung the pebble and Sunflash struck it with his mace, sending it straight up into the night. He crouched and held out one paw, and the infant stood solemnly on it and was lifted high.

“Where has that pebble gone? the badger asked him.

A little paw pointed straight at the sky. “Way up der, it stuck inna star now!

Yelling and laughing, the big badger dashed off across the beach with a horde of little ones clinging to him.

“Cummon, lets gon paggle inna water!

Skarlath looked up from a bowl of soup and shook his head. “Shame on him, hes worse than the babes!

The Guosim slept on the shore that soft autumnal night, and never had they felt more safe. The presence of Sunflash drove away all fear of trouble. Next morning, Log a Log stood on the rocks that skirted the broadstream. Cupping his paws around his mouth, he warbled a long ululating call upstream.

“Logalogalogalogaloooooog!

It was answered so faintly that at first Sunflash thought it was an echo, but the shrew Chieftain set him right.

“That is our elders coming downstream with the logboats. We of the Guosim dont care to do too much traveling by paw.

In a short while the boats appeared. They were long log-boats carved from pine trunks, punted skillfully by old shrews.

Log a Log took Sunflashs paw. “Youll like our settlement; well lay on a feast for you thatll make your fur curl, matey.

The big badger shook Log a Logs paw firmly. “No, thank you, friend. I have my own path to follow.

Folrig and Ruddle nodded in agreement. “Aye, matey, were bound a long ways from here.

Sunflash grabbed the two otters and, tucking one beneath each elbow, he walked to the broadstream and dropped them into the nearest logboat.

“You two ugly mugs are going back with Log a Log, he said. “This part of my journey I must make alone. I can feel it in my bones; the mountain of Salamandastron is not far away now.

By the look on Sunflashs face, the otters knew there would be no room for argument, so they slipped back into their old insulting ways.

Ruddle stretched out in the stem and waved. “Gbye, ole frog frightener, hope yore mountain doesnt crack down the middle when ylook at it, what dyou say, nastynose?

Folrig flicked streamwater at the badger. “Right, me ole bulgebelly, at least I wont have twake up an think Im havin nightmares when I see yore great big badgerbutterbonce starin at me. Take care of yoreself, cos nobeast else will, yore not pretty enough!

Skarlath and Sunflash stood on the shore, waving as the logboats loaded with Guosim disappeared around the broad-stream bend with the shrews paddling and chanting:

“Shrum a too rye hey, shrum a too rye hey,

Dig those paddles deep today,

Where the alders shade me overhead,

And trout swim on the broadstream bed.

Im a Guosim to the water wed,

Shrum a too rye hey, shrum a too rye hey,

Ill see you one day to make,

Oer any stream or pond or lake,

A good ole logboats ripplin wake,

Shrum a too rye hey, shrum a too rye hey, shrum shrummmmmm.

The sounds died off into the far shady reaches of the broad-stream.

Sunflash turned to Skarlath as he set off, saying, “Straight south to the end of autumn, I dreamed it last night. But what of you, my hawk, have you no affairs of your own to fly off to and attend?

The kestrel circled his companions head. “Ill stay with you for a score and a half days, until you reach your dream mountain, then I will fly off and see to my own business.

Sunflash tried to focus on Skarlath as he swooped and wheeled. “How do you know it is a score and a half days away?

Dipping low, the kestrel brushed the gold-striped head with his wings and flew off high, calling, “Because I have flown south until I saw it rearing to the sky. Go now, see for yourself, Badger Lord of Salamandastron!

The autumn was, if anything, as warm as the summer. Sunflash traveled the shores moving south. He saw little of Skarlath during this time, but he knew his friend was not far off, watching, ever watching. Misty mornings dissolved into golden noontides and crimson sunsets, and the big badger found peace, walking alone, making solitary camp at night, thinking, and reflecting on both the past and the future. Often he was visited in dreams by his mother, father and grandsires; they imparted much wisdom to him, as if preparing him for the role he was to play.

The last day of autumn was hot and bright as midsummer. Still as a millpond, the sea reflected a cloudless blue sky. Sea-birds wheeled and called, soaring lazily on the warm thermals above the sun-baked sands

of the shore.

Sunflash stood for a moment, his breath taken away by the majesty of the great mountain that lay ahead of him.

Two hares stood shaded by a cave entrance, watching a fully grown male badger plough his way wearily across the beach toward them. He was big and dangerous looking; the fierce light in his eyes glinted off the metal tip of an immense war club that he carried easily in one paw.

When the two hares stepped out from the shadows, Sunflash could see that both were of a very great age.

“What do they call this place? he asked.

The older of the hares, a male, answered him: “Salamandastron, the place of the fire lizard.

The badger gave a huge sigh. Leaning against the rock, he rested his club on the sand.

“I feel as if Ive been here before, he said strangely.

The female hare produced victuals from within the cave entrance. “Rest awhile. Eat and drink. I am called Breeze, and this is my brother Starbuck. What do they call you?

The badger smiled. He touched one of his headstripes, which was yellow rather than white.

“Some call me Sunflash the Mace. I am the son of Bella and Barkstripe. Im a traveller.

Starbuck nodded in satisfaction. “Your travelling is at an end, Sunflash. You are the grandson of Boar the Fighter and great grandson of Old Lord Brocktree. It is written on the walls of our mountain that you would come here someday.

Sunflash straightened up. He stared hard at the hares. “Written, you say. By whom?

Breeze shrugged. “By whoever wrote that other hares will follow after us. That is the way it has always been and always will be.

Both hares stood in the cave entrance. They bowed to the badger.

“Welcome to your mountain, Sunflash the Mace, Lord of Salamandasiron.

The high sun above watched as the badger and the hares went together into the mountain on the shores below.

Skarlath the kestrel had watched all from the crater peak of the mountain fortress. Fierce pride welled in his breast for the badger who had given him back his life all those long seasons ago in a winter forest. Then, without a backward glance, he soared off into the blue, winging northeast to seek out Swartt Sixclaw.

Book Two: A Broken Trust

18

Nobeast in living memory could recall a winter as long and harsh as the one that followed the brief, hot autumn, though some had predicted it earlier, judging by the great number of berries that were seen on tree and bush at harvest time. Shrieking northeast winds drove the snow into deep drifts, and great, ancient trees were riven, split from root to tip, felled by ice that sought out any weakness in their trunks. Overnight, the west-flowing river stood still, frozen solid. Bushes lining both banks poked bare skeletal twigs at the hostile sky, as if pleading for the release of spring. Bitter and intense, the cruel season took savage toll of anybeast weakened by its ravages. It was a winter of death, hunger, and despair.

The great horde of the Warlord was held prisoner, trapped amid a freezing world of whiteness. They erected crude shelters in the woodland surrounding the riverbank. Sustenance and morale were at their lowest, stifling any ideas of desertion or mutiny as effectively as the snows that shrouded the earth.

Bluefen, daughter of Bowfleg and wife of Swartt, gave birth to a ferretbabe, after which she faded and died, like a delicate spring flower suddenly embraced by severe frost, though it was said that she had never been a strong creature. Unlike the babe, a young male, tough as a deep-rooted weed and marked with the legacy of his father Swartt, six tiny claws showing on the left forepaw. The Warlord lived up to his title the Pitiless One, neither grieving after his wife nor caring for his son. Bluefen was buried with scant ceremony in a shallow hole hacked into the stone-hard earth, while the babe was given to an old female rat to nurse and guard. Swartt acted as though the whole thing was no concern of his.

Nightshade, the vixen seer and healer, had erected a separate shelter as far from the vicious-tempered Warlord as she dared, though she was constantly on call, applying heated poultices and nostrums to her masters damaged six-clawed paw, which pained him agonizingly in cold weather. Hordebeasts crouched and trembled in their own meager dwellings, listening at night to Swartts anguished cries as winter tortured his withered paw. Any horde soldier with a grain of sense kept clear of the Warlord when he was like this, for the ferrets

temper was unpredictable. Once the pains had subsided, Swartt would sit in his fir-bough lean-to, staring into the fire, sleepless, cursing the name of Sunflash the Mace. Revenge was what kept Swartt Sixclaw alive through that winter. The thought of vengeance upon his foe was like food, drink, and sleep to him, as he planned what he would do on the day he had the badger at his mercy. And so the horde existed through that long winter, starving, freezing, and waiting for spring.

Skarlath spent his winter among friends. Snug in the warmth and good cheer of the Lingl-Dubbo cave, the kestrel enjoyed himself hugely. Knowing Sunflash was safe inside the mountain of his hearts desire and that no horde could march in such a terrible season, the faithful bird had no worries. His time was spent making cheese with the help of the molewife Lully, playing with the young ones, brewing ale with Uncle Blunn, helping Tirry and his wife, Dearie, cook wonderful meals with the food they had stored in their supply chamber, and eating, always eating. The fierce bird even learned to sing a few songs and dance to the gurdelstick, though as one of the little molemaids remarked, “Hurr, youm a gettin so gurtly fattinged twill be a wunner if ee be able to fly cumms ee spring toime, hurr hurr hurr!

Skarlath chased her twice round the cave. “Kreeh! Impudent little rip, if I am too fat to fly then Ill fall right out of the sky on top of you!

The old squirrel Elmjak bustled in, carrying two pails of snow to be melted down on the fire. He stamped his paws as Aunt Ummer unwound a long heavy scarf from his neck. “Yurr, zurr Ellumjakky, ow be et owt thurr today? she enquired.

Elmjak seated himself by the fire, allowing the molemaids Nilly and Podd to towel the snowdamp from his bush and back. “Well, let me tell thee, good friends, I think winter has now done its worst, and spring will soon be here.

Tirry Lingl looked up from a bowl of barley broth. “What makes you say that? Have you seen a sign, Elmjak?

Opening his paw, the squirrel presented two tiny flowers to the delighted molemaids. “See, little missies, the best sign of alltwo new snowdrops. I found them right outside the cave in a bare patch sheltered by the rock, mayhap the caves warmth must have helped em a bit, but there they are, two tiny beauties, just like you pair.

Dearie Lingl poured water into a small jug. “Ooh, aint they just about the prettiest, most welcome sight after a long winter, snowdrops! Put

em in the jug ere, itll please our eyes twatch em open. Come on, Auntie Ummer, out wi yore gurdelstick an sing of spring to the liddle flowers!

Skarlath preened his wing feathers, a bit self-consciously.

“Er, er, Ive thought up a springsong. If I sing it could you manage to pick up the tune, Auntie Ummer? The fat old mole winked as she twanged her gurdelsticks string. “Youm sing et, zurr awkburd, oill catch ee up! The kestrel had often joined in choruses, but this was his first solo attempt, and he clacked his curved beak nervously.

“I went off to my bed on one dark winters night, When the ground was all snowy and covered up white, And snug in my blanket I started to dream That the ice had all melted away from the stream.

Ooooh! Flip plop, hear the water drop,

And larks take wing as the buds go pop!

And the sun do shine as the birds do sing,

Throw open wide the gates of Spring!

Then I dreamt that I felt all the earth come awake, And the sky was as blue as a clear mountain lake, And through that old dream a good sound ringing true, Twas the heralding song of a happy cuckoo!

Ooooh! Flip plop, hear the water drop,

And larks take wing as the buds go pop!

And the sun do shine as the birds do sing,

Throw open wide the gates of Spring!

Fol de rol de lair oh lair oh,

Hail the newborn day,

Spring has made the weather fair oh,

Winters gone away!

Skarlath buried his head modestly in his wing feathers as he bowed, and they cheered him to the echo, encouraging him to sing his song twice over. The small hoglets and molemaids danced as the

gurdelstick kept rhythm with the singing kestrel. In the days that followed, Elmjaks prediction proved true. The sun showed itself, weakly at first, then the cheeping of the hardy birds, who had borne winters brunt, began. Warmth started to pervade the land, unlocking the streams to chuckle over the stones with gladness, causing the icicles to weep tears and shorten their lives, melting the crusted white from limb and bough, lengthening the happy hours of daylight.

For the first time in many moons, Swartt felt the lancing pains recede from his paw. He repainted his face and teeth, put a new edge on his sword, and emerged from the crude pine-bough shelter roaring, “Up on yer stumps, you lousy layabouts! Nightshade, take six scouts an see what its like up ahead! Aggal, Scraw, Muggra, kick some life into this skinny slobjawed mess! We break camp now! Westward with the river! Keep up or be slain!

Like a single great beast the horde moved west, churning up mud on the banks of the racing river, grabbing anything that came to paw in their hunger: grass, green twigs, withered roots, worms, dead frogs, and any insect that moved. Somewhere at the rear of the marchers, the ferretbabe whom nobeast had bothered to name tore greedily at a pawful of dead grass as it bobbed and swayed in a bark sling on the old rats back. Tiny sharp teeth gnawing, quick sly eyes darting to and fro, making never a sound as it watched for the opportunity of its next meal.

Four days later, Skarlath sighted the horde below as he ranged the northeastern skies. His brief sojourn with old friends cut short by the arrival of spring, the kestrel was once more soaring the breeze, searching, watching, nothing below missing his keen gaze. He had gone in search of the enemy and, unerringly, he had found them. The horde had arrived at a place where a wide, well-trodden path intersected the river. The path ran from north to south; there was a ford at the river junction.

Perched low down in a horse chestnut tree, the kestrel kept himself well hidden and listened to a dispute that had sprung up between the Warlord and his Captains.

The weasel Muggra was all for following the river. “You said yerself, foller the river west, that way we dont go gittin lost again.

Swartts hand was straying dangerously close to his sword hilt. “Lost? Who ever said that I got me own army lost? Well, speak up, fatmouthwas it you?

Muggra wanted to back down. He wished he had never spoken, but Swartt was not letting him off easily. Muggra shrugged. “I never said you got us lost, not me, alls I said is why go down that path when you said tfoller the river.

Swartt drew his sword casually, glancing at the other Captains. “What dyou lot say, foller the river with Muggra, or go south down the path with me? Or would you like to go and find that traitor Balefur and see if he survived the winter?

All silent, they directed their eyes at the ground. Rumors of Balefur s coming to a horrible end had been circulating.

The Warlord smiled nastily at his weasel Captain. “Not much support from yer mates there. Righto, let me settle this argument. Im Warlord, I command you all, an I say we go south down the path. Is that all right wid you, Muggra?

The weasel was nodding dumbly when Swartt struck, slashing him across his footpaw with the curved sword. Muggra screamed and sat down, hugging his injured footpaw.

Swartt lifted the chin of the Captain on his sword point until their eyes met. “So you win. If yore against marchin down the path, then you dont ave to, mate, ycan hop! Now up on yer paw an lets see yer hoppin out front there. Id hop fast if I was you, cos if ydorf t Ill use me blade agin, but next time it wont be on yer paw!

Without further argument the entire horde started marching south down the path. Swartt shot a glare in the direction of Nightshade, whose face was the picture of disapproval, and snarled, “Now dont you start, vixen. One word from you an ycan join ole Muggra fer a hop!

Skarlath had seen and heard enough. In time he would report the hordes movement to Sunflash, but first he felt it important to warn others, particularly the occupants of the big redstone building he had sighted some days back as he was searching for signs of Swartt. It was a large construction and looked newly built, a fine dwelling-place for whatever creatures chose to live there. Unfortunately it stood square on the pathside. Swartt Sixclaw and his horde could not possibly miss it if they marched four days south down the path.

19

Extract from the writings ofBarlom, Recorder Mouse of Red-wall Abbey and grandson of Timballisto, who was friend to Martin the Warrior.

I wish that I had known Martin the Warrior, but alas he is gone with the other heroes who helped to build this beautiful Abbey. My grandfather Timballisto (peace be upon his memory) used to tell me tales when I was a tiny Dibbun, stories of the wild old times. He would often sing songs or recite poems about the warriors who fought and helped to form our order, battled against tremendous odds, and made this Redwatl, this way of life for all of us whom they would never live to see. But that is the way of things, and we revere their names now, knowing they sleep in peace after a task well done. Only one remains amongst us; they say she is a living miracle, Bella the Ancient of Brockhall.

I had always known that female badgers have a great life span, but I have heard even the most senior of our elders say that the silver badger will go on forever. Poor creature, she is the most loving of beasts, almost blind with age now, a snail could move faster than she. Bella never talks of the old days. Abbess Meriam says that is because it is too painful for her. Long ago Bella lost a son of her own; nobeast knows what became of him. Now she cares for our young, the Dibbuns, and all the Abbeybabes are very fond of her. I myself have seen her send a wailing babe to sleep with merely a stroke of her paw upon its head. I hope that she will be with us for many long seasons yet; they say a badger may live almost four times as long as others, let us hope this is so.

Tonight there is to be a feast; we will be celebrating the memory of the great ones, Martin, Gonff the Mouse-thief, Columbine, Dinny the mole, Abbess Germaine, Ben Stickle, my own grandsire Timballisto, and a list of heroes, friends, and Redwallers too long to mention. There will be no sadness, but great joy in our Abbeyhow could we be unhappy to recall those who live forever in our minds? It would shame their memories for us to weep at table!

But enough of my ramblings. Im so absentminded that I missed lunch today, but that is soon to be remedied, for I hear the gruff tuneless singing of my friend Togget, grandson of Dinny. He never forgets to bring me a snack if he misses my face at table.

“Ho a bumblybee eem a wunnerful burd, Sings a song loike youm never hurrd, Ho a fuzzbuzz fuzzbuzz fuzzbuzz buzz, Thats all eem ever duzz duzz duzz!

Togget trundled into the gatehouse, bearing a tray covered with a cloth, then, bowing low, he whisked off the cloth neatly. “If n twerent furr oi, maister Barlom, eed starve-nunger gurtly. Veggible zoop, Tober Ale, applencheese furr ee!

Barlom took them gratefully from his friend. “What would I do without you, Togget? How can I repay you for your constant kindness to a dusty old Recorder?

The moles heavy digging claw reached out for Barloms quill. “Let oi make writin marks in ee gurt book, zurr.

“Hmm, well all right, just one, right here at the bottom of the page where nobeast will notice. Dip your pen, Togget.

Togget licked the quill point several times before dunking it deep into the inkwell. Smiling broadly, the little mole flourished the quill and bent to write at the foot of the page. Barlom smiled as he watched him. Eyes scrunched, tongue sticking from the side of his mouth, Togget concentrated on writing a big scrawling X. He dotted it with a full stop.

“Thurr, that be et, moi name! he announced.

Barlom shook his head as he retrieved his quill pen. “Thats not your name. Youre called Togget, that says ex. “

The mole nodded sagely. “Aye, hex, that be moi mark, oi be gudd at makin et, hurr!

Alongside the cross, Barlom wrote the name Togget. “There, thats how you write your name, see.

The mole patted his friends paw sympathetically. “Sum-toimes oi wunner why theym callen you a cleverbeast, maister Barlom, youm no gurt writer o moi name, hurr no! Ho well, oim off twake ee Friar oop now. Gubbye, zurr.

As soon as Togget was gone, Barlom burst out laughing.

Young Bryony watched Togget approaching as she sat sunning herself against the great Abbey wall. The pretty little mouse-maid wore a mob

cap askew, and her white apron was stained with berry juice. She patted flourdust from her paws as she rose to meet her friend, complaining, “Ole Bunnys still snoring, I cant wake him.

Togget waved a paw in the air as if creating a spell. “Youm leave thatbeast to oi, moi dear.

Friar Bunfold was sleeping in his favorite place, an old wheelbarrow in the orchard. His bulging stomach rose and fell with each snore, the leaves of an overhanging pear tree trembling with every exhalation of his breath. Bryony covered her mouth to stifle a giggle as her molefriend shook the fat mousefriar by his sleeve urgently. “Coom on, ole zurr, wakey oop, ee toald oi to wake ee ifn ee gurt cake was a burnen in ee hoven!

Bunfold fell out of the barrow with a start. “Cake burning, where, what cake?

As Togget and Bryony ambled back off to the kitchens the mole nodded ruefully. “Dearie me, but oi do tell whackin fibbers, tho et did wake ole Bunny oop, hurr hurr, that et did!

Cheerful Redwallers called out to Bunfold as he bustled through Great Hall on his way to the kitchens.

“Good afternoon. Friar. Whats for dinner tonight?

Exercising his dry wit, Bunfold gave a mock scowl at a young squirrel. “Boiled frog an toasted clouds for you, Brugg, mladdo!

Brugg made a face, playing along with the Friar. “Yukk! Sooner have lightnin soup an ditchwater!

Togget managed to pull Bruggs tail as he passed. “Loight-nen zoopnditchwatter, oill see wot oi cn do for ee, maister, bo urr!

Bryony giggled helplessly at the face Brugg made, and gasped, “Dont be sad, Brugg, Ill see if I can bake a little thundercake to dip in your lightnin soup, hahahaha!

The Abbey kitchens were all abustle, clouds of steam wreathing the woodlanders as they dashed to and fro. A huge hedgehog wife called Myrtle waved a ladle at a large cake that lay on a stone cooling slab, saying, “Dyou want to slice it now, Friar? It baked well.

Selecting a flat, thin slicing knife, Bunfold winked at her. “Burnt cake

eh, well lets see. Togget, bring the cherry conserve. Heartwood, is that meadowcream ready yet?

Heartwood, a reliable old otter, dipped his spoon into a pottery bowl and sampled the golden mixture. “Stirred gently to a turn, Friar matey, ready as ever!

Lifting the bowl, Bunfold was forced lo execute a nimble sideskip for two tiny otters scooting past with a laden trolley, both yelling in deep olderbeast voices, “Gangwaaaaay, watch ybacks there, mates!

Bunfold arrested their progress, catching both by their aprons as he halted the trolley with a quick footpaw. “Whoa there, steady up, Dibbuns. Whats all this?

The otter twins, Blatt and Scrimmo, waggled their tails respectfully at the Redwall Friar.

“Buttn mushrooms, matey, sir!

“Aye, an watershrimps too, sir, matey!

Bunfold sorted through the snowy white mushrooms and inspected the netful of almost transparent watershrimp. “Good work, Dibbuns. Did you gather these?

“Sir, this very mornin out in the woods, matey.

“Our mum elped us too, she said to bring em straight tyou.

Bunfold rummaged in his apron pocket and, pulling forth two candied chestnuts, he gave the otters one each. “Champion stuff! Dont forget an thank your mum for me. Theyll make great pasties for the feast this evenin. Want to stay and watch me cutnfill this big cake?

Blatt and Scrimmo nodded furiously. Myrtle lifted both and stood them on the cooling slab for a good view of the proceedings.

Togget stood by, tottering wearily, both paws latched firmly on to the handles of a sizeable jar. “Youm gunner chatter-njaw wi they two hotters or fix oop ee cake, maister? Thisn aint gettin much loighter, burr no.

With swift sureness Bunfold sliced through the sides of the pale fawn cake, and then sliced again. The little otters watched wide-eyed as the Friar worked, separating the cake into three flat circles, moist and

gently steaming. Bryony closed her eyes, savoring the aroma.

Heartwood smiled at the otters, “By okey, mates, it do smell good!

Blatt and Scrimmo were allowed to wield flat beech wood spreaders, covering the bottom layer until it was one thick smooth circle of dark red conserve. Then Togget and Bryony took their turn, layering the middle tier even more thickly with meadowcream. Heartwood and the Friar carefully placed the three circles together in their former positions and coated the cake generously with the remainder of the meadowcream.

The six cake makers began decorating, working around the sides and top with a random pattern of hazelnut and almond flakes, sliced early strawberries, and tiny young rose leaves crystallized in honey. The finished cake attracted great attention. Redwallers gathered round to admire and comment on the masterpiece that had been created in their kitchens.

“Its the very picture of a spring afternoon!

“Bo urr, et surpintly lukks wunnerful coolncreamloike!

“Yes, shame it has to be eaten, really.

“Hah! Ymean twould be a shame not to eat it!

“Bet I could eat the lot, all on my own!

“Greedyguts, youd be sick for two seasons!

“But itd be well worth it for a cake like that!

“Hush now, here comes Mother Abbess!

All work in the kitchens stopped as Meriam Abbess of Red-wall entered; never appearing to walk, she glided in like a swan crossing a still lake. Meriam was tall for a mouse, slender and of middle seasons, though her great wisdom and serenity would have done credit to one twice her age. Clad in a simple long robe of pale green belted by a soft white cord, paws folded into her wide sleeves, the Mother Abbess of Red-wall radiated calm and respect to everybeast around her. A rare fleeting smile hovered about her hazel eyes as she viewed the confection and said, “A truly beautiful cake, Friar Bun-fold.

Bunfold bowed, his chubby face glowing with pleasure. “Thankee,

marm, I had lots o good help tmake it.

A brief nod passed between Bryony and the Abbess, who said, “I would not doubt the truth of that, Friar. It might have spoiled in the oven whilst you were napping in the orchard, had it not been for the vigilance of Togget and our little flower, Bryony.

The surprise on Bunfolds face was forestalled as Meriam continued speaking, lowering the tone of her voice. “You are a good old Friara little rest each noontide is not begrudged you, Bunfold. Leave this now, I am sure your helpers can prepare the festive food well enough. I need the wise counsel of yourself and Heartwood. Please accompany me to the gatehouse. Barlom has a visitor waiting there.

Friar Bunfold swiftly untied his apron and hung it up, wiping face and paws on a clean towel as he issued orders to Togget. “Could you make up a tray and bring it to the gatehouse, my friend? Hot mint tea, a flagon of cold fruit cordial, some of those scones we baked this morning, oh, and a plate of the thin arrowroot and almond slices that the Abbess favours, theres a good mole!

“Hurr that oi am, roight away, zurr Bunny!

Toggets words were lost upon Bunfold; he and Heartwood were scurrying off in the wake of Abbess Meriam, who was gliding away from them rapidly.

Barlom was self-appointed as Gatekeeperthe gatehouse was one of the few places he could carry out his Recorders duty in relative peace. A solid-looking squirrel named Sumin often dropped by to chat with him, and he was headed there that day on Barloms request, to discuss the strange visitors arrival.

Sumin arrived with the Abbess and, in his stout, no-nonsense way, held open the door for her, nodding curtly. “Marm, tis a kestrel within your gatehouse, dont be feared. Im sure he means harm to nobeast.

The Abbess gestured for Sumin to enter. “Mayhap you should hear what this bird has to say. Please come in with us, my friend.

When Bunfold and Heartwood arrived they entered also, leaving the gatehouse door ajar. The fierce, handsome kestrel was perched on a chairback, watching all with keen golden eyes. As Meriam introduced herself and the others, the hawk watched them in silence, his head coming up sharply as a knock sounded on the door, followed by Toggets voice.

“Yurrs drinknvittles furr ee goodbeasts insoid o thurr!

Heartwood took the tray and closed the door. The food was placed before the kestrel, who dipped his beak courteously, and said, “My name is Skarlath. I serve Sunflash the Mace, Lord of Salamandastron, a great warrior!

Meriam held her paws outward, a sign of peace. “You are welcome within our walls, Skarlath. Redwall Abbey is open to all goodbeasts who come seeking rest and food.

Hunching his wings, the kestrel leaned forward. “My thanks to you, Abbess, but I have time for neither food nor rest. I felt duty bound to bring news when I saw your Abbey.

My Lord Sunflash has a great and merciless foe, Swartt Six-claw the ferret Warlord. They are sworn enemies for many long seasons now.

Meriam poured herself a little mint tea. “We have heard often of Salamandastronit is a place that stands for freedom and justice, protecting the far coast. Though you will forgive me for saying that we have no knowledge of Sunflash the Mace, or of this Swartt Sixclaw. What have they to do with us, Skarlath?

The kestrel opened one wing and pointed north. “Even as I speak, Swartt is coming this way with his great horde of vermin. Your Abbey lies in his path. I came to give you warning. Sixclaw is strong and evil, and, though he seeks Sunflash, I am certain that he will try to conquer Redwall if he sets eyes upon it.

Sumin was well experienced; he had spent many seasons ranging Mossflower country. He nodded in agreement with Skarlath. “You are right, friend, this is always the way with vermin, especially those who travel in great bands. But what would you have us do? Salamandastron is too far away to ally ourselves with your Lord.

Skarlath swooped from the chairback to the door. “If Swartt comes to Salamandastron, Sunflash is well able to deal with him. I do not know the strength of your warriors here, so I cannot suggest your course of actionI merely come to warn you of the danger. Now I must be gone; my Lord will want to know of the ferrets movements. Seasons and fates be with you!

Without further ado, Skarlath unlatched the gatehouse door and soared off. The Abbey dwellers stood in the doorway, watching the hawks flight, south by west. When he had been swallowed up by the

blue vault of the sky, they went indoors to hold counsel.

Abbess Meriam looked from one to the other. “Friends, this is serious news. Redwall appears to be in great danger. What do you think?

Barlom spoke up. “Where is this ferret Warlord and his horde? Skarlath didnt say, exactly. One day away, two, maybe a week ... or just a few hours, who knows?

“Then we must find out straight away. Heartwoods voice held no hesitation. “I say we raise our own army and train them. Swartt wont get Redwall without a fight.

Friar Bunfold stamped his footpaw angrily. “Aye, well show the vermin a thing or two!

“Wait. Not so fast, Sumin interrupted the irate Friar.

“You talk as if Redwall were full of trained warriors and fighting beasts, but I doubt if any of us but Bella has ever seen a real vermin horde, or realize the damage and slaughter they could inflict upon Redwall!

Barlom thumped the tabletop, sending quill and parchments fluttering, then he banged the table once more for effect. “Whats to stop us training our own army? Better that than to sit about waiting for a Warlords horde to conquer us!

Meriam placed a restraining paw on her Recorders shoulder. “Shouting will get us nowhere, Barlom. I think we should hear more of what Sumin has to say.

The sturdy squirrel outlined a plan that had been forming in his mind. “What if this Swartt never gets as far as our Abbey? What if he has to take a different route to Salamandastron?

Heartwood looked mystified. “Why should he do that, mate? He shrugged. “You heard the hawk say Swartt was headed down the path towards us. Why should he change course?

The Abbess placed a paw to her lips. “Sshh! Listen to Sumin and find out! Carry on, friend.

The squirrel outlined a bold and daring scheme. “Squirrel archers an otter slingthrowers, thats what we need. Ill bet me an Heartwood could raise a goodly band of em from around this part o Mossflower.

Now, we take them north up the path an intercept the vermin, stayin on the east side of em all the time. Then we hit an run, all the while stayin out o sight so Swartt doesnt know what numbers hes up against. A good squirrel archer or otter slinger who knows the lay o the land can make himself seem like six, workin undercover. We strike an hit an keep on strikin an hittin, dodgin an hidin all the time! Make the ferret realize he cant stay out on the path in the open, force him off into the woods on the west side so the vermin have ttake to the west shores an follow south lookin for Salamandastron. That way Swartt wont use the road an hell never know the Abbey is here!

Barlom was quivering with eagerness. “Youre right, Sumin, Im coming with you!

The strong squirrel shook his head decisively. “No, Barlom. I take only squirrels who can vanish into trees, or otters who can fly underwateran invisible army!

Bunfold bit his lip in disappointment. “Why cant we go an strike a blow for Redwall an freedom? Men Barlom would make good warriors!

The Abbess placed her paws around their shoulders. “Of course you would, thats why youll be needed back here. If Sumins plan fails, Ill need fighters on our walls to defend the Abbey. Id like you and Barlom to be in command of Redwall should the need arise.

Bunfold tried to swell his chest, but only succeeded in puffing out his stomach. Barlom quivered slightly with pride and busied himself rearranging his parchment and quills.

“Nobeast in Redwall must know of Swartt and his horde, Abbess Meriam cautioned her friends. “What passed between us in this gatehouse remains secret. I will not have panic in my Abbeymost unseemly. We carry on with the feast this evening as planned.

Friar Bunfold noted the sad looks of Sumin and Heartwood. “Dont worry, brothers, you wont miss anything. When you return from defeatin the vermin Ill make you both a special welcome-back victory feast with my own two paws!

20

That evening the Abbess stood up on the west battlements of the outer wall to watch the sunset. Bryony accompanied her; the two were special friends. Meriam turned from the evening sky and viewed her Abbey.

“What are you thinking of, Mother Abbess? You look sad, said Bryony, tugging the wide, pale-green habit sleeve.

The calm eyes blinked momentarily, slightly moist. “I was thinking of our long-gone heroes, little one, how they helped to build this beautiful place from rose-colored sandstone. Your own great grandsire, Gonff the Mousethief, and his goodwife, Columbine, were part of it all. See the wonderful Abbey building beyond the gardens and lawns? It soars to the sky, oaken doors, stained-glass windows, and carved stone. Every room inside, from the wine cellars to the kitchens and larders, Cavern Hole, where the Dibbuns play on winter nights, Great Hall, where we go to feast this evening, the dormitories, sick bay, passages, stairs, and corridors, all, all were built for us and otherbeasts who will come after.

“Nothing must happen to this wonderful placenot to the pond, the orchards behind our main building, or even the gatehouse, set in the side of the main gate over which we stand on these ramparts. Look at this great wall, battlemented and constructed to keep out fear and famine. See how it stands open to the west flatlands, bordered by the great trees of Moss-flower Wood on three sides. You and I and others to come will add to it. One day when these stones are old, Redwalt shall have a belltower and a bell, libraries, tapestries, and a schooling place. Is that not wonderful, Bryony?

The little mousemaid looked up into Meriams face. “Wonderful indeed, but you still look sad, Mother Abbess.

Meriam smiled one of her rare smiles. Taking Bryonys paw, she led the way down the gatehouse steps. “Sad? Why should I be sadwere going to a feast together! What happier occasion than that, my pretty one?

The mousemaid laughed aloud men, for the great Mother Abbess of all Redwall Abbey did a most unlikely thing. Picking up the hem of her gown in one paw, she skipped across the lawn with Bryony, the two of

them giggling and chuckling like a pair of Dibbuns escaping on bath night.

As they entered Great Hall, a chorus greeted them; the young ones were impatient to get started.

“Cut the cake, cut the cake, Cut the cake for goodness sake, Me an my mate have each got a plate, An here we have to sit an wait. So cut the cake, say the grace, Lets get cream upon me face, An sticky paws as a slice I take, Oh cut that cake for goodness sake!

Gliding across to her big chair, the Abbess put on a mock frown. Silence fell in the hall like a stone.

Meriam waited until two small fat moles pulled her chair back so she could sit. Tucking paws into her sleeves, she remained standing, gazing out across the foursquare set tables. Candle and lantern lights twinkled against spotless white linen, posies of buttercup, kingcup, daisy, and apple blossom lay wreathed amid the festive fare. Bunfolds great cake dominated all; it stood above the fresh loaves of wheat, oat, and barley bread, golden-brown crusts glowing. Cheeses lay sliced and quartered, colored from deep yellow through to pale white. Woodland trifles topped with honeycream jostled for position among carrot flans, watershrimp-and-mushroom pasties, spring vegetable soup, and the favorite of moles, deeperVever tur-nipntaternbeetroot pie. Latticed fruit tarts sat alongside fruit pies and applecream puddings. To refresh the palate there was old cider, October Ale, cellar-cooled mint tea, fizzy strawberry cordial-and-dandelion-and-burdockcup.

And still all was silence as Abbess Meriam stared severely about her, repeating aloud the Redwali grace for the occasion.

“This feast weve made to remember you, Who made our Abbey great, Comrades, stout of heart and true, Belovd by valorous fate. Dinny, Gonff, and Columbine, Good Martin and Abbess Germaine, I raise to you this glass of wine, And to others, too many to name. So join me, friends, this toast I call: Redwali heroes one and all!

The last line was echoed by everybeast; a sip was taken from each drink. Still the silence held under Meriams stern gaze. Suddenly she winked, and flashed a swift smile. “Well, I dont know about you lot, but Im starving!

Amid applause and roars of laughter she sat down. Then the feast of the Redwali Heroes was begun.

Not half a league away, the night foliage of Mossflower rustled and a streambank came alive. By the light of a silver half-moon, a hundred creatures readied their weapons. Heartwood turned to a huge brawny otter who had sprung from the water armed with javelin and sling. “Yore warriors ready, Skip-perjo? he said.

Rocks clacked in the big fellows sling pouch as he patted it. “Right as rain an fierce as thunder, matey!

Sumin patted the shoulder of a small but extremely fierce-looking female squirrel. “What dye say for your lot, Red-farl?

She ticked the barbed tip of an arrow, grinning in anticipation. “Anything for Redwali an a chance of a vermin scrap. You point the way, bucko, well be there before ya!

“I say, old thing, goin tbe a minor tussle, wot?

Sumin peered through the gloom and was surprised to see a lanky hare carrying an immense bow and a quiver of arrows bigger than any he had ever seen. The squirrel blinked in surprise, but Redfarl merely waved her bushy tail, saying, “Hes all right, we found him wandering lost a few seasons back. Best shot Ive clapped eyes on, though his arrers are like spears. Would ybelieve, he wants to be a squirrel like us? Great fighter, though, but sometimes Ive got my doubts. He fights like ten an eats like twenty!

The hare was indeed a curious sight; his short bob tail was looped around with a cord, which led up his back and was fastened to his ears. The normally taciturn Sumin hid a smile as he whispered to Redfarl, “Whats his name?

Redfarl shook her head. “You dont want to know.

Sumin coughed to disguise a giggle. “Yes, I do.

The squirrel warrior smiled wryly. “Go on then, ask him.

Sumin pointed at the strange creature. “Whats your name, hare?

Bending his lanky legs, the hare stooped and then shot up, landing in the lower branches of a stunted oak. “Got the species wrong, old thing. Im a squirrel now, doncha know. Oh, dont tell me, Ive got the bally old body of a hare, but here, where it counts, in the headnthe heart, Im a blinkin great tree walloper, a squirrel!

Sumin tried not to look astounded. “I never asked your species, hare, er, squirrel, I asked your name! What is it?

The squirrelhare leapt to a higher branch, missed it, and fell flat on the ground in front of Sumin. “You dont want to know! he said.

“Yes, I do!

“Oh, all right, then. Mname is Wilthurio Longbarrow Sackfirth Toxophola Fedlric Fritillary Wilfrand Hurdleframe Longarrow Leawelt Pugnacio Cinnabar Hillwether ...

“Stop, stop! You were right, I dont want to know!

The squirrelhare twanged his bowstring musically. “But you can call me Jodd. Dyou want to know what thats short for?

Redfarl gave the creature an exasperated glare. “No, he doesnt. Come onlets get goin!

The bushes rustled, there was a small splash in the stream, and a moment later the woodland was quiet as the warriors vanished like smoke on the breeze, heading northward to where Swartt Sixclaw the Warlord was camped with his horde.

21

All through that dreadful winter, heavy gray-green seas pounded the rime-crusted shores, and immense rolling waves hurled themselves high above the tideline. Sometimes the breakers nearly touched the mountain itself, but the extinct volcano stood solid, proof against all weathers since the dawn of time. Inside Salamandastron, for the main part, it was dry and warm, particularly the inner chambers of the honeycombed rock. Hares of the redoubtable Long Patrol had made H so; it was not just a fortress, but a home in which they could rear their families in comfort.

A young and very shrewd female hare named Sundew was Sunflashs constant guide and companion throughout the winter. She saw that all the badgers needs were catered to with the minimum of bother. His persona! living quarters were quite high up in the levels of mountain chambers. They were big and comfortable in a rough way, as befitted a Badger Lord.

Sunflash had awakened with a start on his first morning, then, realizing where he was, he rolled in a leisurely way from the cushion-strewn rock ledge that served as a bed. Throwing wide the wooden shutters of a long rectangular stone window-frame, he gazed out at the restless sea and dark, cloud-scarred sky, illuminated by that pale dusty lavender light that often heralds the oncoming of winter. Hearing the thick cedar door creak open behind him, the badger did not turn, but remained staring out to the horizon.

Sundew stood beside him, paws cupping her chin as she leaned on the sill, watching the birth of a new day. “Goin tbe a jolly hard old winter, mLord, she said.

Sunflash glanced sideways at her. “Indeed it is, Sundew, and harder for me than most creatures, for I have a lot to learn about this place.

“Then let us go and have breakfast. When you have eaten, I will show you around your mountain and try to answer all your questions, Sire.

The dining chamber was a scene of chaos. Hares are reputedly mighty eaters, and it was as if each was trying its hardest to live up to that reputation. Long trestle tables were packed with hares, from lanky, tough old males, through to formidable-looking harewives, leverets of both sexes who fluttered their eyelids at one another while stuffing

food shamelessly, and little ones with atrocious table manners who gorged and fought alternately. The food was good, but not fancy: autumn pears and russet apples, nuts and berries, hot oatmeal, soft white bread, cheeses, and herb tea, with flagons of cordial for those who wanted it.

As Sunflash entered an immediate silence fell upon the diners. He shunned the huge carved chair that was the seat of the Badger Lord, choosing to sit by a young male leveret instead. Hurriedly the servers set out food and drink before him.

Sunflash broke bread and winked at the leveret, asking, “Whats your name, young un?

“Bradberry, Sire, but the chaps call me Bradders, doncha know.

The badger looked across the table at a female leveret who was twitching her nose and fluttering her eyelids at Bradberry. “Well, I tell you, Bradders, that young haremaid yonder looks as if shes trying to tell you something.

A chubby young hare seated at the other side of Bradberry stopped sucking oatmeal from a bowl long enough to comment, “That old gels Fordpetalshes jolly deep in love with Bradders. Silly as brushes, the pair of em, Sire!

Bradders wiggled his ears so hard with embarrassment that they almost twisted into a knot. He averted his eyes shyly, paying detailed attention to some crumbs on the table. “Yah, go stuff nuts up your nose, Forty. Soppy ole haremaids, always makin faces an wigglin eyes at me!

Sunflash stifled a smile as he bit into a russet apple. “You shouldnt be so good-looking, then! Try to seem a bit ugly and battered, like me.

Fordpetals big brown eyes widened, and she leaned over toward Sunflash, smiling boldly. “Oh, Sire, how could you say that youre uglynbattered? I think your golden stripe is very prettymatter of fact, youre a very good-looking badger, if ypardon me sayin, wot!

Sunflash rose hastily from the table, taking with him a hunk of cheese and another apple.

“Youre right, Bradders, he said. “She is pretty soppy! See you later.

Sundew took Sunflash through the cellars, where he inspected . the

drinking stock, stopping to sample from different barrels with a small tasting ladle.

“Hmrn, I like this one, very fruity and warm!

“So it bally well should be. Sire; thats old elderberry wine, been sittin there fifty seasons, they say. Very good for coldsnchills, but two beakers of itd blow your ears off!

He was shown through the bachelor hare barracks, sickbay, larders, dormitories, meeting chambers, and nursery. Next came the armory, ceJls, and lookout caves; practically that whole day was given over to viewing all Salamandastron had to offer. Sunflash began to realize that he was Lord over what amounted to a town inside a rock.

When they were above the level of his own accommodation, Sundew stopped and said, “Only you may go here, Sire; few hares have been allowed this far.

Turning to ask her the reason why, Sunflash found himself alone. Sundew had vanished downstairs. Walking down a broad passage, Sunflash came to a hanging curtain; he pulled it aside and discovered a great forge room. There was a forge fire at its center, with bellows, a stock of timber and seacoal, and nearby stood a mighty, horned anvil. Spears, daggers, lances and arrows, javelins, heavy slings, and clubs lined the walls. A gigantic broadsword hung from metal pins; the badger took it down, surprised at its weight but delighted by the balance of the fearsome battleblade. His grandsire Boar the Fighter may have wielded it, or his great grandsire Lord Brocktree. Sunflash put the sword aside and picked up his own weapon, the mace; it felt better suited to his paws. Several sets of finely made badger armor stood about: deep-chested breastplates, shining steel greaves, and warlike helmets, and there were shields, too, with heroic devices engraved upon them.

Passing through the forge room, Sunflash wandered upstairs, around corners, down passages, until he felt completely lost and overawed at the vastness of the mountains interior. Then he came to a dead end: suddenly the corridor ran out, and he was facing a bare rock wall. Sunflash inspected it and noticed in it a crack, little more than a claws thickness. Setting his own claws into the crack, he tugged sideways, and the rock gave a bit, grating noisily. He pulled harder, until the crack widened sufficiently for him to wedge his mace handle in. Setting his shoulder to the macehead, Sunflash gave a mighty shove, and the crack opened wide. One more hard push and the whole wall

started to swing outward. The secret doorway was open.

Flint, steel, and tinder lay on the floor inside, along with several torches of dry brush. Swiftly he struck flint to steel, blowing the sparks that had landed on the tinder into life. A small flame appeared. Sunflash lit a torch and walked to the narrow hall.

Then with a roar of shock, the badger staggered back, dropping the torch. Swiftly he retrieved it, sparks showering around him like fireflies as he held it high. There at one end of the hall was a fully armored badger seated upon a throne! Immediately he knew that this was his great grandsire, Old Lord Brocktree. The hairs on Sunflashs back stood on end as he walked forward to stand in front of his ancestor. The visor of Ihe splendid warhelmet was closed over the Badger Lords eyeless sockets. Sunflashs paw trembled as he traced it through the dust on Brocktrees burnished breastplate. He knew that inside the armor there remained nought but a skel-eton of the once great warrior, but there was no denying that their blood was one and the same. Sunflash knelt and wept then, for the heavy burden fate and seasons had placed upon his family.

The guttering torch brought him back to reality, and he looked around for something to keep the light going. There, beside a great wall covered in carvings, he found a hammer, chisels, and a lantern. Gratefully he lit the lantern from the dying torch and sat upon the floor, staring at the rows of cuious pictures engraved across the wall. Sunflash breathed in the sweet-smelling smoke from the lantern; it was not an unpleasant aroma. Gradually he leaned over until he was lying flat on the cool floorstones; they felt good, restful. He put aside the smoking lantern with its dim golden light. A great desire to sleep overtook him; closing his eyes, he listened to a soft voice singing to him from afar. The corridors of his mind became one with the dim, incense-wreathed hall and its music.

“Rest awhile, sleep awhile, Here where the warrior stays, Old as the dust of seasons, Soft as the call of lost days. Mountain Lords marked out by fate, Watch oer great seas forlorn. You are the heart of this ancient rock, Where mighty legends are born.

Pale shades of bygone Badger Lords, hares in battle formations, searat galleys, vermin hordes, and the clangor of war mingled with pounding surf in the dreams of Sunflash the Mace. Louder and louder the pounding grew. Sunflash came awake in darkness; the lantern had gone out. Somebeast was pounding against the far wall from its other side. Dim cries reached the Badger Lords ears.

“Sire, are you there? Answer if you can hear us!

Sunflash stood upright, bellowing aloud, “Im in here, wait!

Groping his way to the wall, he felt around until he encountered a deep crack. Sunflash pulled both ways, gouging huge blunt claws into the stone rift, and the entire wall moved fractionally. Howling his war cry, the badger pitted his strength in one colossal effort against the groaning rock.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

The wallrift opened three full pawlengths. Shaking dust from his eyes, Sunflash kicked his mace into the gap, wedging it open. Sundew and several other hares were on the other side in the forge room. They shouted out in relief.

“Oh, thank the fur V fates youre all right, Sire!

“Whew! When you go missin, you make a proper job of it, wot?

“Whats that sweet smell? Whew, whatve ybeen cookin in there, mLord?

“Mustve eaten somethin tkeep him goin three days, wot!

Sunflash could scarcely believe his ears. “Three days? You mean Ive been in here three full days?

Sundews paw came through the opening, and she patted Sunflash s face, as if to reassure herself that it really was him. ; “Rather! An three nights, doncha know, this is the morn of the fourth blinkin day, Sire. Id have never forgiven myself if we hadnt found you, worried out of mmind I was!

Sunflash interrupted her recriminations. “Is there a lantern or a torch in there? Pass me a light through. Hurry!

There was a few moments scratching about, then a flaring, iesin-soaked torch with a metal sconce ring on it was thrust the opening. Sunflash took it, saying, “Stay where are, I wont be long. Theres something I must see.

The carved wall was covered with pictures of badgers and cattles, searats, vermin bandsthey were all there. Sunflash recogmzed a figure near the end; it was obviously his grandsire, Boar the Fighter, armor-

clad, armed with a great battle-blade, putting searats to flight. Curiously, the next figure was small, but quite heroic. It was a mouse, carrying a broken sword hung about his neck on a cord, and there were other smaller figures accompanying the mouse on a journey toward the mountain. Next was a likeness of the same creatures leaving Salamandastron, though this time the mouse was wielding a bright new sword of great beauty. Beyond that was a small space. Sunflash caught his breath. Carved into the wall was a clear picture of himself, carrying his mace over one shoulder, walking toward the mountain.

22

In the forge room, the hares sprang aside as the wall gap rumbled wide. Sunflash opened it by using his great mace as a lever, then he squeezed through and pulled the mace after him, not a moment too soon. The rock rift ground back into place, closing the gap in the forge-room wall. They stared curiously at the Badger Lord as he stood there calmly, a faraway look in his dark eyes.

Sundew was profuse in her apologies. “Beggin your pardon, mLord, we should neverve ventured this far into your personal quarters, but we were so worried!

Bradders had also come along with the search party. “I say, m. Lord, you must be absolutely starvin, old Sire. The last mouthful of scoff you had was breakfast, three flippin mornins agomust make a chap jolly hungry, that sort of thing!

Sunflash rubbed his eyes and shook his great head to bring back to normality. He patted Sundews paw. “You did the right thing, young un. Bradders is right though, Im really hungry. Is breakfast over?

Forty, the fat young hare who was Bradderss pal, nodded. “Not a bally crumb left, old lad, er, I mean Sire.

Sunflash could not help chuckling at the tubby hare. “I couldnt imagine there being much left on any table once youve had your fill, wobblechops. Never mind, Ill fix something for myself in the kitchens.

Sundew whispered in Sunflashs ear, “First you must come to the sick baythere is an urgent matter that cant wait.

Sunflash recognized the two slight figures laid in twin beds immediately. He went to them and took their paws. “I remember you twoits Breeze and Starbuck. Youre the two elders who met me when I arrived here that first day.

Starbuck blinked his rheumy old eyes and coughed fitfully. “Aye, Sire, that was us. Do you know, we bodi served under your grandsire Boar the Fighter.

Sunflash looked closer at both creatures. It was then that he realized just how old they really were. He turned to Sundew, saying, “If this is right they must have more seasons on them than anybeasts I have

known.

The young hare dampened a cloth and wiped the wrinkled brows of both the ancients. “They speak true, Lord. These two are the only ones left who fought alongside your grand-sire, and how they lived this long, nobeast knows. Every last day of autumn season since the death of Boar the Fighter, they have both stood in the main cave entrance by the shore, as if awaiting your coming.

Breeze pressed Sunflashs paw feebly. “Lord Boar told us of a dream he had; he told us to watch for the goldstriped warrior. You came, now our waiting is at an endis that not so, Starbuck?

The old male smiled weakly and managed a nod. “Aye, tis so, sister, our duty is done now. We go to the Dark Forest. Lord Boar will have a great feast prepared in our honor.

Sunflash pressed Starbucks paw gently. “Tell me about my grandsire, he said.

Starbuck gazed at his small withered paw, almost lost in the badgers massive one. “What is there to tell, Sire? Boar was a mighty fighter. None could stand against him when the bloodwrath took him. He was a true Badger Lord, and so are you. I see it in your eyes, feel it in your paw. You will be a mighty warrior, even greater and more fearsome than you are now, eh, Breeze?

The old female tightened her hold on Sunflashs paw. “Aye, that is true, but you will fare better than Lord Boar, because you love young ones and babes, I know this. The young will always befriend and admire you. Boar was a lonely creature; the only babe he ever spoke of was your mother, Bella. She was his babe, but all the young ones of the earth belong to you in friendship. Be good to them.

Sunflash and Sundew stayed with Starbuck and Breeze until they fell asleep, then they left the room quietly and went down to the kitchens. Sunflash felt two things: hunger and the need to cheer up after his long sojourn in the secret chamber and the saddening experience of sitting with two old creatures whose seasons had run out. The cooks looked up from their steaming pots and bubbling concoctions as Sunflash entered. They bowed briefly, and the Head Cook, a fat, bad-tempered bachelor hare, inquired, “Do you require food, Sire? I will cook your meal myself.

Sunflash lifted the lid of a pot and sniffed its contents, saying, “Hmm, porridge again! Dont we ever have anything exciting?

Clang! The Head Cook slammed his ladle down on a pan lid. “Sire, you are in my domain now, the kitchens. You are also in my waykindly take yourself off somewhere!

All work in the kitchens stopped; the younger hares, who were minor cooks and helpers, held their breath momentarily. The Head Cook was something of a tyrant, and they wanted to see how the new Badger Lord fared against him.

Sunflash could have cowed the Head Cook with a single glance, but the badger never used bullying tactics. Instead he began peeling a big russet apple, smiling at his opponent. “What dyou put in your porridge, friend? he asked.

“Salt, oatsnwaterwhat else would yput in porridge, eh? the cook replied snappishly.

The badger began tipping the ingredients in the pot as he spoke. “A lot more oats to thicken it up, less salt, more green-sap milk than water, a good portion of honeycomb, maybe some dried fruit, apple rings, hazelnuts. Dont let it cook too long, turn it out onto a tray to cool, slice it up in squares, and youve got good sweet oatcake, best eaten warm from an oven.

An instant round of applause went up from the kitchen helpers. The Head Cook turned on Sunflash, furious at having another experimenting with his porridge. “Thats not the way Id make porridge, Sire. Who taught you to cook, if I may make so bold as to ask?

Sunflash finished peeling and coring the apple. “Moles and hedgehogs, friendthe best cooks I ever knew. See this apple? Stuff the corehole with candied chestnuts and a dribble of honey, bake it in the oven, then serve it piping hot with meadowcreamever tried it?

The cook thrust out his chin defiantly. “No! And whats more, I wouldnt want to!

“I would, Sir, frizzle me paws, it souns wunnerful, it do!

The Head Cook glared at the young hare who had piped up. Sunflash strode over and shook the keen-eyed youngsters paw. “Whats your name, mate? he said.

“Bloggwood, Sire!

“Well, I like the look of you, Bloggwood. Are you a good cook?

“As good as any, Sire, an willin tlearn. I likes tcook!

“And tell me, Bloggwood, if you were in charge round here and somebeast came to you with a tasty recipe, what would you do?

“Well, Id elp em tcook it an see if n we cd make it taste even better!

With a few deft movements, Sunflash snatched the Head Cooks tall hat and placed it on the young hares head; then, lifting Bloggwood with one paw, he set him on top of a table.

“As Badger Lord of Salamandastron, I appoint you, Blogg-wood, new Head Cook in my kitchens. The rest of youwill you help our friend to produce good and tasty meals? Ladles and aprons were hurled high in the air, and the help and assistants cheered aloud. The former Head Cook stood in front of Sunflash, hatless, bewildered by the sudden turn of events. “But what about me? Whatll I do? he cried.

Sunflash threw a friendly paw about his shoulder, saying, “Well, youve never liked cooking, have you?

“Of course not, but its a job. Somebeasts got to do it.

“Right, but you didnt like doing it, so you dont have to it any longer. What dyou really like doing, friend? “Well, er, Ive always been interested in brewing ales, cor-, and wine. Here, would you like to try some of my cow-wine, Sire?

The hare opened a cupboard and pulled out a flagon and beakers.

Sunflash watched him pour two beakers full, and said, y not, Ill try anything once. He sipped, and rolled his eyes appreciatively. “This is excellent! Can you make fizzy strawberry cordial for little ones?

The hare winked, and snorted, “Can I make fizzy strawberry cordial? Listen, matey, er, Sire, I can make it so fizzy itd curl your fur!

Sunflash shook him heartily by the paw. “Well said! Go and see our cellarkeeper and tell him his workload is halved, because Ive just appointed you joint Chief Cellarkeeper and Winemaker Brewer of Salamandastron!

As Sunflash and Bloggwood produced a tasty giant turnover of leek, carrot, mushroom, and dark gravy between them, word got around.

Hares came filing into the kitchens with requests and observations, knowing the new Badger Lord would give them a fair and good hearing. He did!

Within the space of half a morning, Sunflash the Mace had appointed an assistant cellarbeast, two flower gardeners, a new sick bay assistant, a carpenter, banquet arranger, and a whole host of young ones who wanted to be armorers and forge assistants to the Badger Lord.

Later, Sundew sat with Bloggwood and some others, as they helped themselves to an impromptu lunch of the big turnover, which had been named a Bloggflash Special.

The badger put aside two slices, rich, dark gravy seeping from them onto the plates as he popped them in the oven.

“Keep an eye on them slices, Sundew, he said. “Theyll do for Starbuck and Breezes supper tonight. The old unsll enjoy my turnover.

Sundew wiggled her ears in admiration of the Badger Lord. “Well, well, Sire, youve certainly made some jolly old changes round here. Id say youre doin a spiffin job, wot!

Sunflash shoved her lightly, almost sending her sprawling. “You can stop wiggling your ears at me, missiebesides, youll have to show a little more dignity now mat Ive decided to appoint you as my confidential aide.

Skipping and laughing. Sundew almost collided with Forty, who was holding up a chubby paw for Sunflashs attention.

“I say, old Sire, can I be official food taster? Id be jolly good at that I think.

Sunflash roared, laughing until he had to hold his sides. At suppertime, Sunflash and Sundew took the turnover slices up to the sick bay, only to find Dewfleck, a quiet older hare whom Sunflash had appointed as sick-bay assistant that morning, sitting weeping on the top stair. Her face was buried in her paws as her whole body shook fitfully.

Sadly the badger set down the two plates and sat on the stairs next to her. “Its Breeze and Starbuck, isnt it? he asked.

She nodded, sobbing brokenly. “Oh, Sire, they was oldin paws, just

lyin there all peaceful like. I thought they were avin a little doze, but ole Breeze an Starbuck, they was ... Boohoohoohoo!

Sunflash dried her eyes with the corner of a kitchen apron he had been wearing all day. “There, there, hush now, those old uns were looking forward to meeting their friends in the Dark Forest, they told me that only this morning. Isnt that right, Sundew?

The young hare sniffed as she wiped her eyes against the apron. “Absolutely, Sire. Theyll never have tface a rotten ol winter again; theyre both happy now, along with your grandsire.

Throughout that long winter the hares of Salamandastron came to know and love their new Lord. Sunflash was all things to them: friend to the old, counselor to the young, and playmate to the babes, who were his constant delight. He looked forward eagerly to the spring, when he planned to take up farming once more. Often on dreary winter afternoons the forge room was alive with helpers as Sunflash and his blacksmiths turned out spades, hoes, rakes, and trowels, in readiness for the coming seasons planting and cultivation. The badger had almost forgotten about his foebeast, Swartt Sixclaw, and would not think of him until the arrival of Skarlath in the early spring.

23

The vermin horde found the path broad, smooth, and easy to march on, and good progress was made on the first day traveling south. That evening, they camped in an untidy sprawl, right across the path and on both sides of it. Tender young shoots and new green foliage, which would have been shunned as food any other time, were welcomed after their winter starvation.

Next day blustered in bright and breezy, lightly warm with random fleece clouds scurrying across spring skies. Swartt was in a good mood, pleased with the ground he had covered the previous day. Muggra the weasel Captain was still out in front of the army, dragging himself painfully along on all fours, his injured footpaw causing him great pain.

Pitilessly, Swartt marched hard behind Muggra, watching him crawl as he spoke to him in a cruel voice of mock reason..See now, friend, you couldve been marchin upright an brisk like the rest of us if you adnt chosen to argue wid me. Come on now, dont go sulkin an mopin, apologize tme like a goodbeast an ask me fer mercy. He kicked the Captain, sending him sprawling on the road.

Muggra spat earth as he whimpered, “Mercy, Lord, I was wrong to argue with yer!

Swartt laughed harshly, stepping on Muggras back as he passed him. “Get out o me sight, ysnivellin1 craven, an1 thank yer lucky stars Im in a good mood tday!

Sss.sssthunk!

A javelin came streaking out of the blue and buried itself deep in the path, in front of the Warlord. It stood quivering as the ferret fell back and seized Nightshades paw. “Where in the name o blisterin blazes did that come from? he cried.

The vixen tried desperately to extricate her paw from the ferrets viselike grasp. “I dont know, Lord, but it looks to me like some sort of warning that we should go no farther!

Swartt held on to the paw, glaring at her. “Tell me true, fox. Did you ave any visions or dreams about this?

Nightshade wrenched her crushed paw away, shaking her head. “None, Sire, I saw nothing!

Tugging the javelin loose, Swartt broke it across his mailed paw. “One javelin aint goin tstop this horde. Forward march!

The Warlord stood still, allowing the marchers to walk past him. Screams rang out as the foremost three vermin fell, two pierced by arrows, the other felled by a hefty rock. Suddenly the horde was in disarray.

“Theyre in the woods on the east side! Swartt roared. “Scraw, charge em with spears, wipe every last one of em out! Aggat, Nightshade, line some archers up, herejump to it!

Redfarl watched the spearbeasts charge into the woodlands, letting them get sufficiently far from the path before nodding to a score of squirrels perched in the treetops. Half of the vermin were cut down by a hail of arrows, the rest, turning to run back, were set upon by otters whirling heavy loaded slings, which they used as clubs. As quickly as they struck, the attackers faded into the woodland.

On the path all Swartt heard was a few distant screams, then silence. He held up a warning paw, saying, “Stretch those bowstrings; be ready; keep yer eyes peeled on them woodlands!

Still not a sound. Then Swartt heard a strange noise and saw the bushes shake not far from the path. “Shoot at those bushes! he said, pointing.

A volley of barbed shafts shredded the foliage, and the rat Captain, Scraw, toppled out, already wounded by a squirrel arrow but now transfixed by seven more from his own side. Swartt performed a dance of rage, whirling his sword wildly. Horde archers ducked to avoid the blade.

“Idiots, did none of ythink to look before shootin? he yelled. “Put up those bows until we can see “em!

As the vermin archers relaxed their bowstrings, there was a shout from the east woodlands. A whistling rain of rocks and javelins hit the unsuspecting archers, and one large stone caught Swartt a glancing blow, stunning him. Nightshade signaled four vermin to carry him to safety, as she called out to Ihe rest of the horde, “Into the woods on the west side of this pathhurry!

The vermin needed no second bidding. They hurled themselves at the bushes, helped on their way by a shower of missiles from the hidden attackers.

The old rat carrying Swartts son was hit. Clutching at the javelin protruding from her side, she tugged at the backsling..Tearing loose the carrying cradle, she dropped it, babe and all, into a shallow ditch bordering the west pathside. She crawled painfully after the retreating horde and was trampled by other vermin in their haste to escape death.

Down in the ditch the ferretbabe wriggled from its restricting sling and began gobbling a mess of frogspawn from a muddy pool. It fed voraciously, neither whimpering nor crying.

Nightshade pressed cobwebs and damp leaves to the side of the Warlords head. Swartt gritted his teeth and staggered upright, grabbing a weasel as it sneaked past. “You! Did yer see em, who were they, ow many ...

The unfortunate weasels reply was cut short by a gigantic arrow, which silenced him forever. A jovial voice rang out from somewhere deep in the woods. “I say, top marks there, Jodders. Good shot, wot?

Swartt looked around wildly. He could not stop the horde retreating deeper into the woods; they ignored his commands.

“Halt! Stop there! he yelled. “What are ye runnin fromsome ragtailed little bunch o woodlanders? Stand an fight!

Another spearlike arrow thudded into the trunk of a sycamore, right near the Warlords head. Silently, he decided that discretion was die better part of valor and fled too.

The great otter Skipperjo was left in command of the path. His otters crouched in the foliage on the west side, ready to deal with any vermin who tried to regain control of the road. Sumin and Redfarl pursued the horde; travelling high in the trees, they picked off stragglers. The vermin ran as if chased by unseen demons, each trying not to be at the back of the horde, which was the most vulnerable position. Gradually they slowed, weariness taking toll of their trembling limbs.

Late afternoon found them in a deep natural hollow somewhere in the west reaches of Mossflower. Swartt sat, allowing the vixen to bandage his head with a mud and leaf poultice.

He glared at the silent horde, venting his spleen on them.

“Squirrels n otters, thats all they was, a bunch o misr-able squirrels n otters, an you beauties ran from em. Tell em, Nightshadeyou saw them, didnt yer? Squirrelsnot-ters, dials all they were!

A surly voice called out from the horde, “I never seen squirrels shootin arrers as big as thatn wot wiped out pore Grinflit!

Swartts head was aching; he was too tired to reprimand the culprit. Instead he beckoned his Captains, and they gathered round as he lay back, covering his eyes with his mailed paw. “Well, whatve you lot got tsay fer yerselves, eh? he growled.

The replies were what he expected.

“No point in gettin slain for trespassin on some other-beasts road, Chief.

“Keep travellin west, thats what we were doin in the first place.

“Aye, you cant slay an invisible army. We lost a good number today, an didnt even see who did the killin!

Swartt stood up, shaking his head sorrowfully but secretly glad that his Captains had provided him with an excuse not to turn back and seek retribution on the foebeast. “Huh, the backbones gone from you lot, yer a load o jellyfish. Ah well, I spose well keep goin west through this forest if yer all too scared to go back an avenge yer dead mates.

Redfarl perched in the low branches of an elm nearby, listening to what was going on. Her tail shot upright, a signal to the waiting squirrel archers stationed in the trees not far from the horde. They fired a line of shafts into the ground, not a pawsbreadth from where the vermin sat. Slightly farther back in the woodland cover, Jodd lay flat on the earth, his head inside a great hollow log. The hares voice echoed and boomed as he called slowly in a loud sepulchral voice, “Begone from our land while you still live! Worms feast upon any who try to stand against us; their bones rot upon the territory of the phantom slayers! Go nooooooooowww!

All the squirrels in the trees, plus a few otters who were with Jodd, echoed the mournful howl: “Go nooooooowwww!

Nightshade could be heard shouting as the horde took to their heels and charged westward into Mossflower, the speed of panic urging

them on.

“Carry Lord Swartt, he is injured! See the line of arrows, it is a warning, the phantom slayers have spoken. Let us go!

The vixen found she was talking to herself; the horde had gone. Without a backward glance, she dashed off after them.

Some of the squirrels nearly fell from the trees, laughing. Jodd was still lying with his head in the hollow log, calling mournfully, “Im starving. Wonder whats for bally supper, us phantoms have tjolly well eeeeeeaaaaattttt!

Sumin gripped Redfarls paw gratefully. “We did it, thanks to you an Skipperjo. Redwall Abbey is deep in your debt. We will hold a feast for you all!

The squirrelhares voice boomed out from below. “Thats the ticket, a great feast! Soooooooooper!

Skipperjo met them back at the path, and there was much paw-shaking, tail-wagging, and back-slapping.

“Never lost a one of my otters, we tricked em good, mates!

“Aye, all my archers are accounted for, not a scratch on any of em. We did a great thing here today, eh, Sumin?

The sturdy squirrel beamed proudly. “We did that, it was risky an darin, but we pulled it off. A good yarn to tell the young uns, Skipperjo!

The brawny otter held up a paw. “Oh, talkin1 about young uns, matey, lookit what I found.

He signaled to a female otter, who came forward bearing a small bundle, which she carried in two slings tied together across her back.

The lanky Jodd peered into the improvised cradle. “Great furnfeathers! Its a jolly little junior vermin. Yowch! The bounder chomped rppaw. Good appetite, wot?

Sumin watched as the otter placed the squirming ferretbabe on the soft grass at the pathside. Skipperjo shook his head, saying, “Pore liddle thing, looks arf starved. Whatll we do with it?

Sumin waggled a paw at the ferretbabe, and it snarled. “Suppose well

have to take him back to the Abbey an let Abbess Meriam sort it out, thats unless anybeast here fancies adoptinim?

There was silence. Redfarl touched the ferretbabe gently, and it bit her. Stonefaced, she watched the small creature licking its teeth, savoring the taste of blood, and said, “I know tis a hard thing to say about a babe, even a liddle vermin, but let me tell you, no good will ever come of this one. Dont ask me why, I just feel it in my fur!

24

Toward evening, Abbess Meriam stood on the north wall battlements with Bryony. They had been waiting and watching for days, but Meriam had not told Bryony why. The sounds of singing drifted to them on the twilight breeze, and the Abbess leaned across the battlements, smiling with relief. “Listen, Bryony, friends are coming to Redwall!

Lantern lights showed like fireflies, and, as they drew closer, rousing voices could be heard singing a quick marching song.

“Oh we chased em off the highway,

They fled off to the west,

We sent em every whichway,

Our warriors are the best.

Theyll never see ole Redwall,

Cos they were forced to flee,

Sent on their way by shaft n stone

From every greenwood tree.

Bad luck attend the vermin beast

Who came out of the north and east,

Well give em bloodnsteelnstone,

Until they leave our land alone!

Abbess Meriam cupped paws around her mouth and called, “Who goes there?

There were chortles and guffaws as Jodd replied, “Just some jolly ole phantom warriors who need fattenin up, mdear. Did my sufferin ears hear mention of a whackin great feast at your splendiferous Abbey, wot?

Meriams voice shook with laughter as she shouted back, “No, they

didnt, but come in anyway and well see what we can do to silence your grumbling tummies!

A hearty cheer went up from the marchers.

The tale was told and retold over the banquet board, of how a small determined force sent the horde of Swartt Sixclaw, the Ferret Warlord, running defeated into the west. Dibbuns watched open-mouthed as the squirrelhare, Jodd, demolished everything edible that came within his reach.

“I say, this Spring Salads absolutely top hole! Eh, whats that, marm? Oh, yes, indeed, pile it on here, mdear, nothin like apple pienmeadowcream to clear ones palate, yknow. Er, excuse me, young molechap, pass yon turnipntaternwhatever they call that bally great pie you coves eat.

Thank ykindly, no, leave the jolly old dish, might want some for afters, wot!

The leader of the Redwall mole contingent, whose title was always Foremole, winked at the mole who was serving Jodd.

“Hoo arr, thatn be an arebeast, youm baint seed any haininal eaten til youm seed an arebeast, burr no zurr!

Friar Bunfold dashed about, topping off all the beakers with good October Ale. “A toast, friends, to the goodbeasts who saved Redwall! he called.

Beakers were raised, cheers rang to the rafters.

“The goodbeasts who saved Redwall! Hooray!

Amid much whispering and giggling, a steaming cauldron was wheeled in by Togget, Bryony, and Friar Bunfold. The hogwife Myrtle announced to one and all, “Now I dont take no blame fer this concoction, twas a thingummy created by these three ere, in honor of our guests this eve. Oh, you tell em, BryonyI gets all muddled!

“Well, we know that otters like their hotroot soup with watershrimp, leek, onions, and plenty of hotroot, Bryony explained to the feasters, “but we have our friends the squirrels to consider. Their favorite is the treetop broth made from maple tips, acorns, beechnuts, green apples, and horse chestnuts. So, my friends and I combined both, adding a few ingredients of our own. Two beakers of parsley wine, a touch of

ramson, and some winter rosehips. We hope you enjoy itour phantom warrior soup!

It proved to be a great favorite: hot, spicy, sweet, and also strong. Some said Skipperjo ate the most, though Jodd was only a fraction of a ladle behind him.

“Mmmm, mm, quite tasty, very nice, though I do like that deepernthingee pie the molechaps make. Who knows, when Im fed up bein a squirrel I might join up an become a bally mole.

Foremole shook his velvety head vigorously. “Oh, nay, zurr, tis a tumble loif usns lead, youm far better orf bein a squirrelbeast, youm lukk more loik one.

Jodd was quite flattered by this remark, and he hitched hard at the cord tied from his bobtail to his long ears. “I say, dyou think so really? Actually, I do meself. In fact I think I look quite like a jolly old treewalloper these days. Tied the old tail to me ears so itll stretchngrow longnbushy, same as a squirrelchap. Dyou think its workin?

Foremole gave Jodds tail a tug and winked at Togget. “Whoi oi do berleev tis gettin gurtnbushy, eh, maister?

Togget nodded solemnly. “Much longer an etll be a curlen oer onto ee nose, zurr!

The banter and chatter went on late into the night amid an abundance of good food, firm friends, and a general feeling of thankfulness and well-being. Skipperjo, Redfarl, and Jodd raised beakers to the Abbess.

“If were to be rewarded with such a splendid spread every time we defend yore Abbey, marm, then we opes the next passel o villains is eadin down the path tomorrer!

Meriam shook her head. “Fate and fortune forbid such a thing, my friends. You do not need to fight for food at Red-wall; our table is here for you any time you call by our gate. You are always welcome.

As the night wore on, Meriam took Bryony to one side and led her from Great Hall, saying, “Come with me, missie, I have something to show youa surprise.

Together they mounted the stairs and made their way to a chamber close by the sickbay. Meriam tapped upon the door. Bryony thrilled to

the mellow sound of a deep voice, that of tire beloved Redwall Badger Mother, Bella.

“Enter please, there are no locks on my door.

Bella was massive with age. Her silver fur shone in the lantern light, almost creating a nimbus of radiance around her. Raising a huge, age-worn paw, she adjusted small, thick, crystal glasses from her muzzletip up to her eyes.

Arranging a shawl about her friends shoulders, Meriam whispered, “I thought you might be asleep, Bella. Are we disturbing you?

The great shining head shook slowly. “No, no, not at all. Theres no need to whisper, MeriamI sleep when I like and stay awake as I want to these days. Hello, Bryony, my pretty little mousemaid, come and sit with old Bella.

Bryony sat upon the broad soft lap, her favorite place since she had been a Dibbun, and she looked questioningly at Meriam. “What is the surprise, Mother Abbess?

Meriam placed a paw to her lips. “Sshh! Not so loud, mis-sie.

Bella nodded to a cradle within easy reach of her paw. “Oh, dont worry about him. Hes wide awake and taking all in. Leaning over, Bryony saw what the cradle contained. She jumped from Bellas lap and swept the babe into her paws, hugging it. “Oh, its a babe, a little one! Is it male or maid? Whats it called? Whose is it? Where did you get it from? Oh, Mother!

Meriam allowed Bryony to hold the babe. “Not so fast, missie, maybe you wont be so quick to cuddle him when I tell you. He is the young of a vermin, abandoned when they retreated from the path, a male ferretbabe.

Bryony continued nursing the ferret, rocking back and forth. “Poor little thing! He looks so alone and lost! Is he not beautiful, Bella, see!

The ancient badger smiled wisely, saying, “All little creatures are beautiful, Bryony, every living thing when it first sees life is bom in beauty. What they grow to be is a different matter. I have given the ferretbabe a name; he shall be called Veil, because there is a veil over his life before he came here. We know nothing of him.

Bryony looked down at the little ferret. Its sharp slitted eyes were

watching her intently. She tickled its nosetip gently with her paw, saying, “Veil, Veil, its a lovely name. Hello, little Veil. Owch!

Bella exchanged glances with the Abbess before speaking. “He has bitten you, Bryony.

The mousemaid sucked her paw briefly, smiling. “No, not really, it was more of a nibble. Perhaps hes hungry.

Bella closed her eyes and leaned back. “Some creatures are always hungering after one thing or another. I have a feeling about this one, and if I am proved right in the seasons to come, I will tell you why I really called him Veil. But it is far better now to hope for the best that can happen, so we will say no more about it. You are a good mousemaid, Bryony, that is why the Abbess and I decided that you shall have Veil, to bring up and care for. He may benefit from you.

Bryonys eyes were shining, and she hugged the small bundle close. “Oh, Mother Abbess, is it true? I will be like his mother, no, more like his big sister, no, more like his good friend!

The Abbess smiled at her friend the mousemaid. “Make your mind up, missie. Best be a little of all, mayhap thats what Veil will need to grow up good. Put him back in his cradle now and take him up to the dormitory with you. BellaIm too old to care for him, and I have my Abbey to look after. From this day forth he is your responsibility.

When Bryony had taken Veil and gone from the room, Ab-Meriam stooped and dabbed a tiny spot of blood from rush mat. It had spilled from the mousemaids paw when ferretbabe bit her. She sat on the arm of Bellas chair, staring at the crimson dot, and said, “Did we do the right thing, old friend, or will this ferret cause more blood to be in Redwall?

The great silver badger bent down and wiped away the speck with her apron corner. “Only time will tell, Meriam!

25

As the earth turned slowly, time passed and season followed season many times. Swartt Sixclaw and his horde wandered the land, through woodland, across rivers, over mountains, often lost and frequently sidetracked by dissent and mutiny. But his obsession, to avenge himself upon the badger who had maimed and deadened his famous sixclaw, drove the Warlord onward.

Many things happened to swell the infamy of Swartts name. He lost some of his horde in marsh country, fighting a long and protracted battle against toads and reptiles, emerging victorious but with a depleted horde.

Then chance brought him into an alliance with Captain Zigu and his Corsairs. Zigu was a ferret like himself who, having lost his ship on the rocks in foul weather, was forced to range the coasts with his motley band of vermin, some searats, but mainly Corsairs, creatures of any species that chose the marauding life. Zigu was no stranger to Salamandastron; he had seen it from the sea and knew its exact location. He was a valuable, if untrustworthy, asset, and joining forces with him meant that the horde would be lost no more. For Swartt, this sealed the pact.

Southward down the coast the horde ranged, being joined by deserters, mutineers, and other vermin who had been marooned by their searat brethren. Swartt sat upon the beach one morning at the start of summer, picking at a roasted mackerel.

He glanced across at Nightshade, who was tossing shells into the air and watching in what position they fell upon the sand.

“Never mind the stupid shells, vixen, look at my hordejust cast yer eyes over em. Every one a murderer, theyd slit their own mothers gizzards over a morsel of food, hah! Arf of em probly did, killers all! Now Im a real Warlord, the best of a bad bunch, an I could lick any six of em single-pawed!

Nightshade went back to her conjuring. “Aye, Lord, well do great things together. Shells are magic, they dont tell lies. See these here, they are our horde. But see this big curling conch; you can hear the tide come and go if you put it to your ear. Look though, it fell standing straight up in the sandits the mountain. See the distance from

it that the horde lies; we cannot be far from it now.

Swartt shook his head as if in disappointment at his seer. “You know that because of what Zigu told youhe knows how close to Salamandastron we are. Go on, then, if your shells are so clever, what else do they tell you? That little red shell that fell far apart from the rest, what does that say?

The vixen looked at the small red shell and shrugged. “Though it doesnt say anything, it tells me a great deal. You once had a babe, a male? This shell represents him and you would do well to beware of it.

Swartt stared at the little red shell, his lip twisting contemptuously. “Oh, yes, I remember the brat, but that was long ago, hes probably dead by now. We lost him after the battle on the path.

Nightshade narrowed her eyes, staring hard at the shell. “You never really lost him. Seehes come back!

Swartt kicked sand at her. “Idiot! How can a little red shell hurt me?

“Pick it up and see, its not so little anymore.

Swartt picked the shell up and found it was quite a big one. In falling it had been almost covered by the soft sand, allowing only a small part of it to remain visible.

The vixen nodded. “It was a little shell once, but it has grown, Lord. Beware of it, I say. Turn it over and look.

The ferret turned the shell over and scrutinized it, saying, “A few markins on it, like scratches. So?

“Six marks, Lord; six scratches representing six claws!

Swartt spat on the shell and threw it into the sea. “Stupid rubbish! If thats the best ye can do then tis a pore show. Fall in with the rest an git marchin. Swartt Sixclaw decides his own destinyonly fools believe what they see in shells!

Zigu the Corsair strode out on the right flank of the horde, along with his former bosun, a stoat called Welknose. Both could see Swartt marching at the head of the horde.

The bosun had taken a dislike to Swartt and made no secret of it.

“Warlord, huh! Thatn aint no Warlord, more like a puffed-up toad swaggerin out front there. You cd take im, Capn, easily, I knows yer could!

Zigu was an unusual Corsair. Tall and saturnine, he dressed plainly and affected the manner of a gentlebeast. Despite this, he was shrewd and ruthless and feared by many among the searat fraternity for his skill with the deadly long rapier. His paw resting on the fine basket hilt of the weapon, he strode at a leisurely pace, regarding his bosuns angry outburst with faint amusement.

“Lack a day, Welknose, shame on you for speaking of our beloved leader in such a dreadful manner. Tell me, pray, why should I take im,1 as you so quaintly put it?

“So that you kin be the boss of all this lot, Capn. Yer kin bet an oyster to a lobster theyd foller a finebeast like yerself ifn yer tickled Swartt to death wid yer rapier!

Zigu smiled benevolently at his companion. “Hmm, yes, I see what you mean. Mayhap all of these vermin would benefit .from my leadershipbut later, my friend, later.

The stoat wrinkled his long lumpy nose and scratched one ear, saying, “Later, Capn, why later?

Zigu shrugged expressively. “Why not later, prithee? Let our barbaric ally lead his horde against the Badger Lord an his mountain; one would imagine fierce battle and bloody slaughter on both sides. Just before I slew him, my old father used to have a saying:

Where fate is sealed on battles field,

And many low are laid,

The wisest mind says stay behind,

And let the fools get stayed! “

“Haharr haharr hohoho! Welknose broke into raucous laughter. “Yer a caution, Capn, an no mistake. I see wot yer means, we let ole Swartt get hisself killed an then we steps in an takes command!

“Roughly put but apt, my lumpnosed confederate.

Welknose grinned fondly up at the tall Corsair. “Yore aSteal

gennelbeast, Capn. You talks fancy but fights dirtyts real quality, an no mistake!

26?

At the front of the horde Swartt was busy plotting with Nightshade against his Corsair ally.

“Lord, this Zigu creature, said Nightshade, “I do not need shells or omens to tell me that he will slide that thin blade of his into your back one night if he is not dealt with soon.

“Oh, dont worry yerself, vixen, Ive got me eye on Zigu, but we need im to take us to the mountain. E knows where it is, an the best way of approachin it.

“And after that, Lord, what then?

“Simple, we let everybeast know ow brave our Corsair is, then let im take the honor of leadin a dangerous charge. If e dies, well an good, but if he wins the day an comes out alive, you know wot tdo, dont yer.

“Aye, Sire, we hail him as a hero and let him drink fine wine from the silver chalice, like Bowfleg and Damson-tongue.

“Right, we cant let bravebeasts go thirsty, twouldnt be good manners!

Skarlath was too high up to hear what went on below. A mere hovering speck, he noted the moving horde on the shore before winging off toward Salamandastron.

The great mace now hung in the forge room. Sunflash no longer carried it everywhere looped on his paw; it had become a hindrance to his new occupation. Clad in a flowing smock and wearing a woven straw hat, the Badger Lord had become the perfect farmer. Every available surface of the mountainside cultivated: berries and hardy little fruit trees flourished on leeside, root crops in the deeper-soiled hollows of the south e, and cereals on the front where the dark ancient volcanic 1 was more sandy and shallow.

Sunflash sat with his hares on a high ledge. Their chores the day completed, they were enjoying a picnic. Filling his cup with pennycloud cordial, the badger pointed out an area to them, and said, “Well have to shore the edges of that garden with rocks, stop the rains washing the soil away. Leave a few small gaps for drainage, though.

The fat Forty saluted furiously, tugging his eartips and im rustic molespeech. “Hoo urr, zurr Sunnyflasher, roight if I be farmer, burr aye!

Sunflash chuckled as he flung his straw hat at the cheeky hare. “When you get weary of being a mole, let me know. you impudent young rip. Ill teach you how to become a gull and well see how well you fly, from here down to the shore!

Sundew and a hare called Fleetrunn appeared from a side tunnel, carrying a cloth-covered tray between them. Bradberry sniffed, and said, “I say, somethin smells jolly good!

Sundew twitched her ears severely at Bradders. “Keep your grubby paws away from this, gannetface, it was made specially for Lord Sunflash.

Uncovering the tray, Fleetrunn set it before the badger. A heavy dark cake still warm from the oven gave off fruity aromas. The golden stripe quivered as Sunflashs muzzle twitched. “Bradders is right, it does smell nice! Cut it up quicklyhungry farmers dont like to be kept waiting!

“Its a plum-and-almond cake, Fleetrunn explained as she cut it into dark, fragrant slices. “Bloggwood used old cider to mix it with; it had to be baked slow to keep it moist.

“Kreeh! Cake is good for hungry birds!

Suddenly, Skarlath landed on the Badger Lords broad shoulder and started in on the slice that Sunflash held up to him.

“Well, my faithful friend, said the badger, “its more than a season since you last visited me. Eat your cake before you tell me the news. Sunflash blinked as crumbs flew left and right. “Now I know what somebeasts mean when they say hungry as a hawk. I dont suppose you get fresh-baked cake often.

The kestrels throat bulged as he swallowed the last morsel. “It is good cake. I will take some when I go. News is all bad. friend. The Sixclaw is three days from here, with a great horde. There are no young ones and families with him now. These are fighting vermin: Corsairs, searats, marauders, plunderers, the rakings and scrapings of sea and shoreline, as many as leaves in an autumn gale!

The big badgers jaw tightened. “What of our friends Tirry and Bruff

and their families; did Swartt find their dwelling cave?

Skarlaths fierce eye winked. “No, they are safe. The horde entered Mossflower farther south. Tirry and Bruff are out of their path, more northerly.

Suddenly, the cake was forgotten. Sunflash rose, taking the hawk with him, and said, “Come to my forge room, Sundew, and tell the Officers of our Long Patrol to meet me there urgently. This is a counsel of war.

A dozen or so big lean hares of both sexes gathered in the forge room for the counsel of war. These were the Officers of the Long Patrol, tough and skilled in the fighting arts. Sunflash sat on the window seat, and Skarlath perched on the sill. The Badger Lord let his kestrel speak.

“This ferret has a horde greater than any ever seen, far too big to be met in the open. You have not got a quarter of their numbers, but I have been busy raising helpthat is why I got liere so late.

A hare carrying a long sword spoke out. “Help, old chap: what sort of help?

Skarlath pointed north with his outspread wing. “Guosim shrews; their Log a Log has promised me six logboats of shrew warriors to come in from the sea and strike at the rear of the vermin when they arrive on the beach.

Sunflash nodded his approval. “That is good; if the horde of Swartt is as large as you say, we will need all the help we can get. Have you any other ideas, Skarlath?

The kestrel preened a few crumbs from his pinions, saying, “Give me the talisman you wear around your neck, Sunflash, I will seek the help of otters and squirrels.

“Take it, and fortune fly with you, my good hawk! said the badger as he looped Elmjaks greenstone leaf around his friends neck.

Skarlath bowed his head slightly to the Officers, then he was gone, shooting like an arrow through the open window-space.

Then Sunflash addressed the hares.

“Our main fighting will be done from the mountain. We have supplies here, food and water to last us, and that puts the foebeast at a disadvantage. Their provisions are earned with them and cannot last

long. Now, is there anything we can do to harass them while they are down on the shores in front of here? I am open to suggestions.

Sabretache, the hare who carried a long sword, put forward an idea that had worked in the past against invading searats. “MLord, we can dig long trenches, line em with sharpened stakes, an cover em with rush mats disguised by sand, wot?

“Good idea, but surely theyll see them.

A female hare called Hedgepaw held up a light javelin. “Not if mena few jolly old Sleepers give the blighters a taste of these. Theyll run straight into the blinkin pits.

The badger looked puzzled. “Sleepers? he asked.

The most senior hare, a rangy male named Colonel Sand-gall, winked knowingly at Sunflash. “Sleepers, sah, take too bally long to explain what they do, but rest assured that each of these blighters, who fondly call themselves Officers, have a job tdo an can do it rather well, doncha know. Beggin ypardon, mLord, but if you concentrate your efforts fortifyin all entrances an exits at ground level, then well see to the rest. Actually, I think the right form for the present is to marshal an arm all the troops, wot?

Sunflash was impressed with the confidence and ingenuity of his hares; he knew that despite their affected speech manner, they were dangerous beasts and expert warriors. But he had a final word. “Good enough, Ill leave you Officers to it. However, stay away from the Warlord, Swartt Sixclawhes mine!

Every hare in the forge room knew by the look on the Badger Lords face that he would brook no interference in the matter of his sworn enemy. They saluted smartly and went off about their duties.

Overnight, Salamandastron was transformed into a military garrison. The hares emptied both forge room and armory of weapons; and bows, arrows, slings, and rocks were stacked at every rock slit and window in the mountain. Young ones were taken deep inside to the central inner caves. Old ones took over the forge, repairing, sharpening, and creating weapons. Random trenches were dug halfway up the shoreline; sharpened stakes stuck up from the trenchbeds. Boulder piles began to grow from halfway up the mountain, ready at the removal of wedges to topple down on any foebeast.

Sunflash worked with a team he had selected. They move around Salamandastrons base, blocking off entrances and exits with boulders cemented together by powdered limestone and sand mixed with water. The main entrance was blocked by a large, rough-timber gate. Old harewives began baking extra food, readying the sick bay for wounded and manufac-oning poultices.

In the midst of all this activity, Sunflash stopped for a moment, to gaze sadly out at the areas he had cultivated. The salad garden had been stripped bare to allow the hares to set up a large, timber-framed rock catapult. He shrugged, sighing deeply. All this peace and beauty that he was trying to create would be ruined by war.

A war that would begin two dawns later.

27

“Where has my little blue honeypot gone?

Friar Bunfold wandered distractedly around RedwalFs kitchens, mixing batter in a bowl that he carried as he went, searching hither and thither. “Sister Orris, watch those pasties, theyre beginning to leak gravy on the floor. Has anybeast seen my blue honeypot? I had it with me on the cooling slab, just after breakfast. Bryony, did you move my honeypot? You know, the small blue one?

Bryony placed a tray of scones on the window ledge to cool. “No, Friar, Im sorry, I havent seen it. Maybe you left it in the wine cellars when you went down for damson juice.

Bunfold beat the mixture in the bowl furiously with his ladle. “No, it never leaves this kitchen. That pot was very special. It belonged to my mother, and she gave it to me when I became Friar here. Ahh! Young Veil, cmere, wheres that honeypot, eh?

Bunfold put aside the bowl and caught the ferret by one ear, shaking him vigorously.

“Yeeeaah! Lemme go! Yowch! Veil squealed. “I dont know anythin about your ole honeypot! Aaaaargh! Bryony!

The mousemaid was between the two like a flash, pulling Veil from the wrathful Friars clutches. “Leave him alone this very instant, Friar Bunfold! How dare you treat Veil like that! Why should he know anything about your honeypot? Youre always blaming him if anything goes missing!

Sister Orris looked up from her pasties. “Thats probably because Veil is usually the one responsible! she said.

Bryony turned on the Sister. “Thats not fair, hes changed! Veil only did things like that when he was a Dibbun!

Myrtle the hogwife shook her paw disapprovingly at the ferret. “Aye, well, he aint a Dibbun no more, but thingsre still goin astray.

Veil ran behind Bryony and, poking his head over her shoulder, he stuck out his tongue at Myrtle. “Yah, fatty ole spiky, go an boil your snout!

“What in the name of goodness is going on here, may I ask? Abbess Meriam had glided in unnoticed. Silence fell in the room. She looked from one to the other. “Please explain all the noise and shouting.

The explanations came thick and fast, everybeast trying to get their say in at once.

“That liddle robber, hes taken my honeypot!

“No, he never, Abbess, theyre always blaming Veil!

“Thats cos hes always to blame, missie!

“No, he isnt, youre all against him!

Meriam held up a paw for silence. “Friar Bunfold, did you see Veil take the honeypot? she asked.

“Er, well, no, I didnt, Mother, but I know it was him!

“He never, Mother, he never!

“Keep out of this, Bryony! Veil, did you take Friar Bun-folds honeypot?

“No, Mother Abbess, I never took it, an he twisted my ear!

Meriam pursed her lips at the Friar. “Please, do not ever do that again. There will be no violence in this Abbey. Come immediately to me if you have a grievance against anybeast.

She turned away from the chastened Friar and placed a paw under the ferrets chin, lifting his head. “Look me in the eye, Veil. Now tell me, and I want the truth, you have nothing to fear: Did you take the pot?

Veil blinked back tears as he tried to return Meriams gaze. “I never took it, Mother Abbess!

Meriams paws disappeared automatically into her wide sleeves. “Then the matter is finished and done with. Nobeast saw Veil take the pot; he should not have been accused without proof. I believe him when he tells me he did not take it. As for your honeypot, Friar, I know it is valuable to you, so we will instigate a search right away. Togget, you will recruit any Redwaller who is not busy at the moment, bring them here, and let the search begin.

Bryony felt so angry at Bunfold and Myrtle that she could not bring

herself to help with the search. Putting a paw around Veils shoulders, she led him out into the orchard. The fruit trees and berry bushes were still; not a single leaf moved in the shimmering warmth of midday. Bees humming and the muted sounds of birdsong from beyond the walls in Moss-flower added to the tranquillity of the verdant glade. Bryony sat beneath a gnarled apple tree. The Abbesss reprimand to stay out of the dispute weighed like a stone on her heart.

She patted the grass beside her, saying, “Come and sit by me, Veil.

The young ferret remained standing, pulling the leaves, one by one, from a red currants foliage. “Weve missed lunch yknow. He sniffed.

Bryony folded her paws and hunched forward, head down. “I dont know how you could even think of food at a time like this. Id be sick if I tried to eat anything. Take an apple if youre so hungry.

Veil plucked a rosy apple that was ready to drop from a low bough. He bit into it, spat out the piece, and flung the apple away rebelliously. “Dont want one! Theyre all against me in this Abbey!

He dashed off out of the orchard. Bryony half rose, calling after him anxiously. “Veil, come back, Im on your side, you know that!

But he was away, dashing off to the bushes near the south wall stairs, a place he often went to in times of trouble.

Bryony sat alone, her mind in a turmoil. Since Veil had been a Dibbun, things had gone missing, and each time she had defended him, never able to believe he was the thief. Often he was caught red-pawed; then she would apologize for him, lectures would follow, then tears and solemn promises from Veil that he had changed his ways. Bryony knew he had not, but she had cared for him, nursed him, and comforted him; the mousemaid loved Veil as if she were his real mother. Standing upright, Bryony wiped her eyes and clenched her paws resolutely. Today would begin a new era. She would assure Veil of her faith in him, show him that others tould like and trust him if he was honest with them. He would discover happiness through goodness, and together they would learn to shake off the clouds of mistrust, until Veil earned the respect of all Redwallers!

The young ferret was growing tall and strong, lithe and sinewy like the father he had never known. He sat in the cover of the bushes alongside the south wall stairs, tossing the blue honey-pot in the air and catching it skillfully with his agile, six-clawed paw. Smiling craftily, he licked the last of the honey from inside the pots rim.

Maybe he might have sneaked it back into the kitchen when it was empty. But no! Friar Bun-fold had twisted his ear; the fat stupid mouse would pay for that by never again seeing his beloved blue honeypot.

Bryony knew where Veil would be. She climbed the east wall stairs in the afternoon heat and wandered slowly along the battlemented top of the outer wall, hoping to catch a cooling breeze. Seeing the bushes moving in Veils hiding place, she remained silent, peering down to see what he was doing. The blue honeypot rose above the bushes as he threw it high and caught it. Bryony held her breath and ducked low, and she bit her lip hard to stop herself crying out.

Holding the pot close in to his side, Veil hurried over to the Abbey pond. Nobeast was there to see him, they would all be inside the Abbey at lunch. Bryony had watched him from her position on the walltop; now scurrying, bent low, she dashed around the battlements, descending the wall stairs at the southwest corner. Arriving at the opposite side of the pond, she peered through a screen of rushes at Veil.

He filled the pot with water and spoke to it. “Thanks for the honey, always tastes sweeter when its stolen. Nobeast will ever see you again. Just think, Im the last creature on earth to touch you. Good-bye, little blue pot!

He threw it high over the pond, drawing in a breath sharply as he realized that he had thrown it too hard. The pot flashed blue in the sunlight as it splashed down at the far side, right in the center of the rushes. Bryony crouched low, watching Veil.

He stood on tip-paw, peering across the pond, not able to see the pot. Then the young ferret laughed, shrugged, and ran off toward the Abbey, thinking that perhaps there would be some lunch left.

It was midafternoon when Togget found the pot, nestling in the top of an open sack of hazelnut kernels. Friar Bunfold was overjoyed, though Abbess Meriam tapped her footpaw thoughtfully. Why had the Friars pot reappeared empty, clean, and washed?

Bryony could not bring herself to face Veil, because she knew he would deny everything. Either that or he would wheedle and weep, explaining it all away until everybeast in Red-wall, with the exception of himself, was to blame. The mousemaid felt an awful sense of guilt, but she could not have left the pot in the rushes, knowing how much Bunfold valued it. Returning it secretly was the only thing she could

do in the circumstances. Sighing heavily, Bryony tried putting the entire incident to the back of her mind. The mousemaid loaded up a tray with cooled mint tea, damson preserve, and some scones freshly baked that day, adding a scoop of meadowcream.

Bella watched the doorlatch rise and the door swing slowly inward. Bryony entered, tongue sticking from one side of her mouth as she balanced the tray she was carrying. The ancient silver badger beamed fondly at her friend. “What a good little mousemaid you are, bringing noontide tea to a helpless old fogy like myself!

Setting the tray down, Bryony arranged the old badgers shawl snugly about her huge shoulders and opened the window to let in a breath of fresh summer air. She poured tea for them both and set out the rest of the food. Then she perched up on the arm of Bellas chair.

The ancient sipped tea, watching Bryony over the top of her tiny spectacles. “So, my friend, she said, “whats troubling your little heart?

“Oh, this and that. Bella, have you been good all your life?

The badgers chuckle sounded like a deep rumble. “Bless you, no, sometimes Ive been quite naughty, like now, piling all this damson jam and cream onto one scone. Shame on me!

Bryony laughed as she watched the scone vanish in two bites. Wiping cream and preserve from Bellas lip, the mouse-maid continued, “What I mean to say is, dyou think anybeast could be naughty all the time and never be good at all?

Bella took another sip of tea. “Ah, thats the difference, pretty one. Most creatures can be good most of their life and naughty sometimes, just like you and me. Others are good and never naughty, like Abbess Meriam. But then there are the other kind, those beasts who never do good, because they dont know how to and wont listen to any advice from good-beasts. Naughtiness can grow and grow, like a marshweed, until it turns to badness, then if it continues there is only one name for it: evil!

Bryony put aside her scone and tea. “Have you ever known an evilbeast, and if you did, well, did they change and become goodbeasts?

The old badger shook her head. “Questions, questions, why all the questions, my little flower? You should be out in the sunlight, enjoying your seasons with the other young Red-wallers. Wait, let me

guess. Do you know somebeast who is evil, is that why you ask me?

Bryony got down from the arm of the chair. “No, Bella, I dont know anybeast who is evil, a little naughty maybe, but not bad or evil. I think that others can drive a creature to naughtiness, always accusing and blaming them. After a while it must make the creature unhappy and drive him, er, or her, to be naughty, because nobody expects them to be good, thats what I think.

A heavy paw descended gently on Bryonys shoulder. “I think we both know the creature you are talking about, little one. Maybe it is the fault of Meriam and myself for accepting such a one into our Abbey.

The mousemaid began fussing with the shawl and plumping up cushions around her friend. “Youre wrong, Bella. I know you are old and very wise, but youre wrong. I dont know who youre talking about. Time for your afternoon nap, marm. Shall I leave the window open?

The great silver badger closed her eyes, saying, “Whilst there are creatures like you on earth, mere is hope for others, my young friend, but dont waste your youth and kindness upon hopeless cases.

Bryony touched a paw to Bellas lips. “Sshh! Enough now, you need your sleep.

Leaving the room quietly, the mousemaid closed the door carefully behind her. Noticing that the door to the sick bay was ajar, she looked in, expecting to see the slender mouse Sister Withe, the Infirmarykeeper and Herbalist.

Veil was in the sick bay; he had his back to Bryony, unaware of her presence.

“Veil! What are you doing in here? she said sharply.

Veil started at the sound of her voice. Bowls and jars clattered and fell as the ferret stammered, “Er... er... Nothing! I... I... er, I was just looking around.

Bryony pointed to the door, eyes alight with anger. “Get out of here this instant, before I report you to the Abbess.

Veil pushed past her, protesting his innocence. “I wasnt stealing anythin, honest I wasnt!

Bryonys love was temporarily clouded by contempt. “Hah! Just like you never stole the blue pot, eh? Ill bet you were surprised when it showed up againif youd had your way it would have been at the bottom of the pond!

The ferrets eyes radiated hatred at the mousemaid who had reared him since infancy. “Yah, go on! Blame me, youre like all the rest. I found that pot by the south wallsteps, but I couldnt return it, could I? Everybeast would say I told you so, it was Veil. I was too scared to take it back, so I chucked it in the pond.

Bryony softened toward him and, taking his six-clawed paw, she tried reasoning with him. “I took it back. Veil, but you could have taken it back, then it would have proved to them that you werent a thief. Cant you see, T did it to help you!

Veil tore his paw from the mousemaids grasp. “You were spyin on me, just like you were a moment ago, Miss Goody-Goody. I hate you!

He dashed off down the stairs, leaving Bryony dumbfounded, with a large teardrop trickling down each of her cheeks.

28?

That same evening, Skipperjo the otter and Redfarl the squirrel brought their warriors to supper at the invitation of the Abbess. It was a jolly meal, and the food, as usual, was excellent. A large red currant, apple, and blackberry tart graced the center table, surrounded by small bowls of gooseberries and cream, a strawberry syllabub, and wild cherry flans. Servers went around with large jugs of dandelion fizz, specially brewed by old Bral Hogmorton the Cellarkeeper and his friend the Fore-mole. It was an instant success, especially with the Dibbuns, many of whom fell about chuckling when the bubbles fizzled in their mouths.

Jodd the squirrelhare set about demolishing an immense deepernever pie, made for him by a group of moles who betted each other that it was too big for him to finish. The Foremole had wagered that he could. Smiling from ear to ear he collected candied chestnuts from the gaping moles as Jodd licked the deep pie plate clean.

“Hurr hurr ahurr hohurr! Ee should never bet agin ow much yon arebeast can put aways, eem a champeen scoffer, ho urr!

Jodd wiped his chops delicately on a white serviette. “My word, ceedingly tasty! Right ho, chaps, whats the jolly old main course look like?

Abbess Meriam shook with stifled laughter. “No more for you until youve given us a song, sir.

Jodd was immediately up, cavorting around the tables and twanging on his bowstring as he launched into a comic ditty.

“O the reason why I sing this ballad

Is cos I wish I were a salad;

If I were a salad, a great big one,

Id lick the plate when I was gone!

But merrydown derrydown, I dont care,

Im hungry as a good old hare.

So all you frogs pay heed to me,

A puddens what Id like to be;

All full of plums an steamin hot,

Id scoff me in a flash, eh wot?

But merrydown derrydown, no not me,

A good old hare is what Ill be.

Then if I were a great fat fish,

The frogs would lay me in a dish;

And when they all sat down to sup,

With knives an forks theyd cut me up.

So merrydown derrydown, lack a day,

A hungry hare is what Ill stay!

Amid the laughter and applause, a mole who was on kitchen duty tugged at the Abbesss sleeve and whispered urgently, “Cumm yurr, mum, ee ogwife be sicked in ee kitchen!

Meriam got up from her chair and glided to the kitchen, with Bryony in her wake, questioning the mole.

“Myrtle sick? What seems to be the matter with her, Figgul?

The molemaid Figgul spread her digging claws, mystified. “Oi doant be knowen, missie. Furst she be a tummypainen, then groanen an a moanen sumthin orful, et quoit upset oi, ho urr!

Friar Bunfold was wringing his paws helplessly when they arrived. Myrtle lay doubled up on the floor, shivering. Others crowded into the kitchen as Abbess Meriam knelt over her, saying, “Skipperjo, Jodd, clear that table; lift her up onto it, gentle now. Myrtle, what is it, my dear?

The old hogwife was decidedly pale, and greenish around her lips. “Ooooohhh! Elp me, marm, the pain, the agony! she wept. Then, mercifully, she passed into unconsciousness.

Sister Withe pushed her way through to the table and swiftly she inspected the hedgehog, feeling her brow, sniffing her breath.

“Looks like shes been poisoned to me! the mouse announced.

A look of horror passed across Bryonys face. “Poisoned?

Sister Withe questioned Friar Bunfold. “Whats she had to eat and drink lately, Friar?

Bunfold waved his ladle distractedly. “Nothin we havent all eaten tonight. As for drink, well, theres that jar of cold water sprinkled with oats and powdered barley. I drink quite a bit of it, because of the heat in heregets quite hot when were cookin, Sister.

Withe took the jar, then she sniffed it, dipped a paw in, and tasted a drop. Pulling a wry face she spat it out, saying, “Has any of this been drunk by you or the kitchen helpers?

Friar Bunfoid shook his head. “No, the helpers have all been drinkin dandelion fizz. Myrtle didnt usually drink the oatVbarley water, said she wasnt sure if shed like it; however, I drink lots of it, an I told Myrtle to drink some, as itd do her good in this heat.

“But you didnt drink any, Friar?

“No, I was goin to when Myrtle drank some as I advised her ... The ladle clattered from Bunfolds paw as realization struck him. “That was meant for me to drink!

Myrtle was carried up to Bellas room by Skipperjo, Jodd, and Redfarl. The Abbess and Sister Withe went with her. They laid the hogwife on Bellas bed as Withe prepared an antidote, speaking her thoughts aloud as she worked.

“Wolfbane, the hooded plant that kills. She must have drunk only a small sipif Myrtle had taken a proper mouthful she wouldnt be with us now. Crushed mustard seed, lots of it in water, that should bring it upwhat dyou think, Bella?

The silver badger answered without hesitation. “Aye, lots of it, youre right. Better hurry!

In Great Hall, Bryony and Togget were helping to clear the tables. Veil began stacking dishes beside them; he looked puzzled. “Bryony, whats all the fuss about? Whys the feast stopped? he asked.

“Didnt you hear? Myrtles ill, they say shes been poisoned.

Veil sat down, disbelief written across his face. “Poisoned? Myrtle? But why?

Togget picked up a great pie dish. “Aye, poisinged, maister, tho shem aloive, thank guddness!

Veil grasped Bryonys paw, his lip quivering. “Poor Myrtle, who would do such a thing?

Bryony watched tears pop out onto the young ferrets cheek. She hugged him, glad that he could show such tender feelings for the old hogwife. “There, there, shell be right as rain in a day or two. youll see. They never said anybeast did it, perhaps it was just an accident, something got into the water jar somehow, who knows?

The mousemaid felt sympathy for Veil, he looked so upset, and she sent him off to bed.

Myrtle was out of danger. Sister Withe had administered the remedy, and Myrtle reacted favorably. After a further treatment of chamomile tea, she had fallen into a peaceful slumber.

Later, in Bellas room, a meeting was held. Abbess Meriam looked sternly at her friends. “There was no way that wolf-bane could have found its way into the kitchens, Im certain. We must face this fact, somebeast put it there, possibly to harm Friar Bunford. We have a poisoner in Redwall! The friends looked at each other, shaking their heads at this announcement.

Skipperjo addressed Sister Withe. “Beggin yore pardon, marm, but this wolfbanedyou keep any in yore herbstocks?

The good Sister pondered a moment. “Wolfbane, hmm, ah yes, I did have some, though I dont think I ever found a use for it; old Brother Farrow, who used to be the Herbalist, left it there.

Redfari nodded toward the infirmary. “Ill wager it aint there anymore. Go an take a peek, Sister.

Withe was away and back in a short time, crying, “Youre right, its gone!

Bella tapped her paws on the chair arms. “So, weve got a poisoner in the Abbey. Whats to be done about it? Nothing like this has ever

happened before.

Jodd the squirrelhare bowed elegantly. “Permit me, mdears. I am afflicted with a wise old head on young shoulders, yknow. Subterfuge is called for here, wot. Leave it to us squirrels an otters, marm, I have a ruse or two up msleeve that I wager will lay the villain by hisor herpaws before the summer is much older.

Redfarl winked at the Abbess. “Aye, ole Jodders might talk like a mole with a gobful of roses, marm, but ycan trust him to solve yer problem.

Abbess Meriam tucked paws into sleeves and bowed lightly, saying, “I leave it in your capable paws, my friends!

29?

Next morning at breakfast, Great Hall was abuzz with the events of the previous night, though nobeast could venture an explanation or solution to it all. When the meal was finished, Abbess Meriam rapped the table with a spoon, calling the Red-wallers to order.

“Silence, please. Stay where you are, everybeast, I have something to say to you all, and to one in particular. A terrible thing has happened. Never, in the history of our Abbey, has anything like this ever occurred. Last night our hogwife Myrtle was very close to death. She had been poisoned, but not by any accident. It is my opinion that Myrtle was poisoned by somebeast sitting here in our midst this morning!

An uproar and clamor arose until Skipperjo thwacked the oak tabletop several times with his hefty rudderlike tail. “Order, mateys! Give order an let the Abbess marm ave er say!

Meriam continued in a loud clear voice. “There is a poisoner among us, but whatever beast did this awful deed will not escape justice. Sister Withe!

The slender mouse stood up, trembling slightly; she was not accustomed to public speaking. She piped up in a reedy voice, which grew bolder as she proceeded. “Whoever poisoned Myrtle used wolfbane, a plant that I know much about. If our poisoner knew much about wolfbane then he, or she, would have used gloves. Let me tell you why. Two days ago I picked the wolfbane, but I forgot to wear gloves to protect my paws. This morning when I woke to come down to breakfast, I looked at my paws. See!

Withe held up both paws for all to look at. They were a deep crimson red, as though they had been dyed. She explained to the hushed audience. “If you hold wolfbane with bare paws it will permanently stain them within two days of holding the plant. Luckily I learned to make up an herbal wash to remove the stain; I have a basin of it in the infirmary. After breakfast I will wash away the scarlet stains in my solution, but the poisoner has no such wash to do this simple task. So, friends, within the next day, or by early tomorrow, we will know who the poisoner is! Withe held up her reddened paws again.

“The creature with paws that look like this!

Veil let his paws drop slowly below table level, though he dearly wished that he could have raised them to wipe away the sweat that was beading upon his nose. Chairs scraped and dishes clattered as the Redwallers rose to go about their days chores and pastimes. Veil remained seated. He felt stunnedthis time he would not be able to deny his guilt. Unless he could sneak up to the infirmary and wash his paws in the special herbal bath.

Bryony and Togget practically leapt up from the table, skipping from Great Hall as they called to Veil.

“Come on, Veil, the strawberries are ready to pick! “Hurr, ee Froir Bunny sayed usns cn gather strawbees, tho ec doant loik us to eat em all, hoo hurr! “Cmon, Veily, is your bottom stuck to that seat? The young ferret was gazing at his paws as he replied, “You go. Til catch you up later.

By midafternoon Veil was convinced that his paws were beginning to redden. He had rubbed them hard on the grass by the south wall, scrubbed them more than a dozen times in the pond, and at one point even used a piece of sandstone to scour at them. His paws were sore, and the more he looked at them, the more he believed they were turning red. More than once he had wandered near the stairs to the infirmary, only to find squirrels and otters sitting, chatting on them. They showed no signs of moving, and the young ferret had to make himself scarce, or they would be suspicious.

At supper Veils seat was empty. Bryony leaned across to Togget as he shoveled up woodland trifle with all the gusto of a hungry young mole. “Have you seen Veil? Its not like him to miss supper, she said.

Togget paused to down a half beaker of pear cordial. “Ummm, eem wurnt lukkin too gudd this arternoon.

Heartwood the old otter joined the conversation. “That young Veil youre talkin about, meself an Brother Barlom saw im not an hour since, sittin in the bushes oer by south wall. I tell you, he looked a bit pasty to menBarlom, we sent him off to bed. Hah! Looked to me like hed been eatin too many strawberries.

Bryony helped herself to some woodland trifle. “Oh, is that all? Hell be all right after a good nights sleep. Did you send him off to his room?

“No, we let him have the little foldin1 bed in the gatehouse, nice an quiet in there if yore not feelin up tthe mark.

After supper Bryony and Togget walked across the Abbey lawns to the gatehouse. The mousemaid knocked, calling, “Veil, its me, Bryony. Can I come in?

The reply was loud and surly. “No ycant. Go wayIm trying to sleep!

“Baint you well, maister? Togget called back. “Zurr eartywood, ee said youm eated too many strawbees, hurr, oi never can eat enuff of ee strawbees, oi dearly do luvs em!

Something struck the other side of the door. It sounded as if Veil had thrown a beaker. “Go away, I said. Go away! Why cant you leave me alone? His voice was shrill with temper.

Pressing her face to the door, Bryony spoke softly. “Poor Veil, Im sorry we disturbed you. Have a nice sleep if you dont feel well; see you in the morning. Good night.

There was no reply, so the mousemaid and her mole friend made their way back to the Abbey.

It had long gone midnight, and the skies were cloudy and moonless. A faint chill breeze caught Veil as he stole quietly from the gatehouse, a length of rope over one shoulder. Silent as a fleeting shadow, the young ferret crossed the Abbey lawns, rounding the south side of the great building. Veil stood back and looked up to the sick bay window. It was shut. He gnawed at his lip, looking desperately for a way in. Then he saw it. Bellas room was next door to the sick bay, and the window was half open.

Veil was strong and agile, and he found he did not need the rope. There was a small corner angle where the stonework was bumpy and rough. Wedging his back against one side and jamming his body into the wall angle, Veil found he could climb quite easily. There was no lack of pawholds, and soon he was up to the broad first-floor sandstone ledge which served as one long windowsill for all the rooms at that level. The stone here had been cut and dressed smoother than at the base. Veil lay flat and crawled along until he reached the open window. Holding his breath the ferret inched it open wider. Ir creaked slightly, but not very loud; he slipped inside.

Myrtle lay on the bed, covered by a quilted counterpane. Bella snored gently, lolling in the deep armchair that she seldom left these days. Veil stood on the cushioned window seat and allowed his eyes to adjust to the gloom inside. He saw a faint strip of light coming under the door, and slowly, softly, he made his way to it, taking care not to

knock against any object he felt in his path. Then he was outside in the small corridor, which was dimly lit by a single lantern on a wall bracket. Closing Bellas room door carefully, he turned his attention to the door of the sick bay, which was slightly ajar. Veil put his eye to the space and peered in.

The sick bay was still and quiet, and it seemed unoccupied. For the first time that day a sly smile was on the young ferrets face. Luck was finally with him.

There, in the dim shaft of light thrown from the barely open door, he could see a table. A glint of copper told him that the basin of herbal solution stood on the tabletop. He opened the door wider and paused a momentstill no sound from within the sickbay. Good! Placing one footpaw carefully in front of the other, Veil made his way slowly to the table. With a deep sigh of relief, he let his paws sink into the dark, cool herbal mixture; now he was safe.

“Give em a good scrub, old ladnothin worse than guilty paws. Wot, wot!

Veil went stiff with shock!

Before he could make any movement, the door banged wide open and the sick bay was flooded with light. Abbess Meriam, Skipperjo, and Redfarl strode in, lanterns held high. Jodd was already in the room, sitting on a bed with a pillow plumped up behind his long ears. He winked at Veil. “Caught red-pawed, Id say, laddie buck!

Veils paws were indeed red, as deep a red as Sister Withes paws had been at breakfast last morning. The herbal mixture was red too, a dark, purple-tinged crimson. Sister Withe entered the sick bay and, brushing past Veil, she dipped a paw in the mixture and licked it.

“Beetroot juice, not very herbal, but it dyes red, as youve just found out. Poisoner!

Veil snarled, and launched himself at her, teeth bared. Jodd moved like a blur; one swift hard kick from his long footpaw connected with the ferrets chin, knocking him spark out. They moved aside as Bella shuffled into the sick bay and glanced at tile prone figure on the floor.

“So, the trick worked, she said. “Our culprit fell into your trap, Jodd. Well done!

The squirrelhare made an elegant leg. “All done by brains and beauty,

marm. Wherell we put this foul felon until youre ready tdeal with him, eh?

Abbess Meriam took a key from her rope belt. “Bral Hog-morton, our Cellarkeeper, has cleared out one of his store-caves. Lock him in there for tonight.

Meriam escorted Bella back to her room, and the silver badger plumped down wearily into her armchair. “It seems we made a wrong decision all those seasons ago, Meriam. The ferretbabe grew up bad.

The Abbess glided over to sit on the edge of Myrtles bed. “So he did, but we tried our best. Its Bryony I feel sorry for. She reared Veil, and no matter what he does, she still has very deep affection for him. We should never have let her raise him; he will break her heart.

Bella nodded sadly. “What could we have done, friend? Neither you nor I would have refused to take a helpless babe into this Abbey. I think we both saw him as Bryony did, a pretty little thing, like all small creatures. Though I remember my father, Boar the Fighter, used to say, When rocks have crumbled to dust, vermin will still remain vermin. “

Meriam sat with Bella until the ancient badger fell asleep. Before she left the room, the Abbess picked up a faded scrap of parchment from where it poked out beneath the rush floor-mat. She stared at it.

Give him a name and leave him awhile, Veil may live to be evil and vile, Though I hope my prediction will fail, And evil so vile will not live in Veil.

Even as the servers laid breakfast places early next morning the news was out, starting as a whisper and growing like a grassfire until it was common gossip throughout Redwall Abbey.

“The poisoner has been caught in a trapit was Veil!

Abbess Meriam saw no point in discussing the dreadful affair; she would speak of it when the time was right. Meanwhile, she sat calm and pensive at the table, her mood affecting the many Redwallers until breakfast in Great Hall became a hushed and somber meal. Many looked toward Bryonys empty place. They nudged one another and shook their heads sympathetically; the good mousemaid would be feeling very sad this day.

When the meal was finished, the Abbess rose to make a short speech.

“Please go about your work as normal and try not to gossip loo much about last nights events. This afternoon when tea is finished, I would like you all gathered on the lawn in front of the gatehouse. To lighten the mood, Meriam smiled one of her rare smiles. “It is a beautiful morning outside, and Im sure everybeast has something to do. Come, cheer up now. Redwallers, and lets not have any creature injured in the rush for the door!

Grinning sheepishly, the diners rose and ambled slowly out.

30?

Togget, Jodd, and Barlom had put together a plate of food and a beaker of dandelion fizz. They placed them on a cloth-covered tray, with a posy of summer flowers arranged in a small jug. Bryony was sitting beneath her favorite apple tree in the orchard, head bowed. She looked up as her molefriend placed the tray in front of her.

“Coom on, missie, he said, “eat ee up an smoil, lookit that gurt long face, eell ave et rainen afore long, hurr!

The mousemaid let out a long shuddering sigh. “Oh, why, oh, why did he do it? How could he? To try to poison ... Oh, I cant bear to think of it. He must have known that hed be caught sooner or later.

The squirrelhare waggled his ears playfully. “Sooner, the way I planned it, jolly good ruse, wot!

Jodd was silenced by a glare from Barlom. The kindly mouse pushed the tray forward encouragingly, saying, “Eat something, pretty one. You wont solve anything by starving yourself. Come on, just a morsel.

Tears sprang to Bryonys eyes as she grasped the Recorders paw. “Im sure Veil didnt mean to do it, Barlom. What will they do to him?

Barlom dabbed at her tears with a spotted kerchief. “Bryony, dont waste your grief on Veil, he will only break your heart. You have a life of your own to live. Whatever punishment he receives will be according to the rules of our Abbey. There is nothing you can do to change that.

Veil hammered and banged at the thick, elm-planked door of the storecave, his voice hoarse from shouting.

“Let me out of here, dyou hear me? Open this door!

Clenching his beetroot-stained paws, he battered the door afreshYoure only a bunch of stupid mice, you aint got no right to keep me locked up; get this door open. Now! Flinging himself down on a straw pallet, he sobbed.

Skipperjo had taken charge of the storecave keys, and now the brawny otter unlocked the door, following Friar Bunfold inside as he delivered the prisoners lunch. At the sight of the food, Veil stopped weeping; he

threw himself at the tray and began tearing ravenously at his meal. The Friar turned his head away in distaste as the young ferret slopped and gurgled, half-chewed food and hastily swigged drink spilling from his open mouth.

Veils eyes narrowed, and he glared hatred at his captors. “Well, whatre you two thickeads gawpin at, eh?

Skipperjo shook a warning paw at Veil. “Mind yore manners, ferret, or Ill mind em for ye!

Veil bared his needlelike teeth at the otter. “Whatll you do, streamdog? Knock me out like that big daft rabbit pal of yours did last night? Well, go ahead, everybeast in this Abbey wants to beat me up, or pull me ears off.

He switched his wrath to Bunfold. “Oh aye, I wont forget you, fatbelly. Found your precious blue jar, did you, eh? After blamin me for pinchin it. Everybeast in this lousy place hates me; I never had a chance from the first day I was brought here as a babe! He went back to eating, snuffling, and weeping around mouthfuls of food.

“I know that Bryony put the pot back secretly, Friar Bun-fold squeaked sternly, “but I didnt say anything for fear of getting her in trouble.

Veil began chuckling through his tears; it was not a pleasant sound. His eyes shifted cunningly around the storecave. Skipperjo moved to block the half-open door as the ferret held up his crimson-stained paws, laughing. “Heeheehee! Nearly got you, Friar Fatbelly, didnt I? Pity silly old Myrtle never drank enough to finish her off. Oh, but dont worry, Ill get you all before Im finished. Heehee! Veil the red-pawed poisoner, eh! Well, next time it wont be just poison Ill use, itll be a noose, a rock, a dagger, anything I can lay my blood-colored paws on. Heeheehee!

Friar Bunfold drew back fearfully from the grinning ferret; Skipperjo shepherded him out and turned the key in the lock, saying, “Something11 ave to be done about that beast, es crazy!

Midnoon saw a visitor to the Abbey, a tawny female owl called Wudbeak. She visited Redwall every summer to exchange news and gossip with her Abbey friends, but also to satisfy her craving for candied chestnuts. Abbess Meriam, assisted by Jodd, Redfarl, and Sister Withe, had helped Bella , down from her room, and along with many other Redwallers ; tbey sat on the banks of the Abbey pond. Wudbeak ate a great many of her favorite nuts from the improvised

picnic that had , been spread in her honor.

Jodd watched her, frowning slightly. “By the left an center! Wheres she puttin them all?

Redfarl whacked him in the stomach with her bushy tail. “Exacly the same place youd be stowin em if we let you loose on those nuts, you great walkin stomach!

Having finished eating, the owl sucked dandelion fizz through a hollow cornstalk to clear her mouth for speaking. “Ah, very nice, so twas indeed! Now, me fine Abbess, tis yerself sittin there tike an ould stone wid ears, waitin on me news.

Meriam was used to Wudbeaks odd accent, and she nodded quietly as the owl took another suck at the straw before continuing. “Dye not know a fierce-lookin kestrel bird called Skarlath?

“Yes, he has visited here once before to warn us of an attack.

“By the faithnfeathers, thats the very feller, a fine hawk-bird. Well, now, not five days since, no, I tell a lie twas six. Anyhow, theres meself, sittin on an ould mossy log countirf me feathers an who should fly up but himself, the hawk that is. Sez he tme, are there many ottersnsquirrels in this part of the woodlands? So sez I thim, well yesVno in a roundabout sort o way; theres treejumpersnwaterdogs aplenty, if you was ttake the time tbe iookin for the beasts. Why dyou ask? Well sez he, because I carry this amulet round me neck, tshow them, theyre tcome tthe aid of my Lord Sunflash at the mountain of Salamandastron on the far west shores. Well now, isnt that the wonderful thing, sez I thim, an who, me bold bird, is yer Lord Sunflash when hes at home? Marm, sez the hawk tme, he is the great and mighty Badger Lord Sun-flash the Mace!

Bella cast off her shawl and stood up. “Sunflash the Mace, Lord of Salamandastron! Oh, thanks be to fortunes and fates! Did the hawk say what he looked like?

Wudbeak cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. “Why no, ma, he didnt, but why dyou ask?

Bella sat back down, her great silver face wreathed in smiles. “Because he is my lost son. Now I know that my dreams were not just imagination. I have looked upon his face and talked with him as I slept.

Heartwood pulled Barlom to one side, whispering to him, “Stripe me! We forgot to tell er about Skarlaths last visit. E mentioned Sunflash to us then!

Barlom kept his voice low as he replied, “Aye, but Bella wasnt feeling too well at the time, and the Abbess told me not to mention Sunflash in case she got upset. It would have done Bella no good at all had it turned out that Sunflash was some other badger and not her son. No harm done, friend, at least she knows now for certain that he is.

From behind Bellas back, Meriam winked slowly at them and held a paw to her lips, before turning back to the owl. “Pray continue, my friend.

“Right, where was I? Oh aye, well it seems that theres this dreadful ould ferret, a six-clawed vermin they call Swartt. Do ye know what the villains up tdohV? Ill tell yer, so I will. This Swartt has gathered a mighty horde of vermin, oh, the rakinsn scrapins of the earth, they are, and hes after at-, tackin the mountain of Salamandastron! Thats why the hawk was Iookin for otters nsquirreis, thelp out his Lord the badger. So, thats me news, Ma.

Wudbeak went back to devouring candied chestnuts as the Abbess bowed to her. “Thank you, my friend, you are welcome to stay as our guest. When you are ready to leave I will have Friar Bunfold pack a good supply of chestnuts for you; the harvest was very good to us last autumn. Wonderful news : for you, Bella?

The silver badger was nodding as Skipperjo and Redfarl helped her to her feet. “Nobeast can know just how wonderful, Meriam. So, my son fights a war against some vermin “ horde, that is the way of the warrior. Badger Lords are never satisfied until warfare touches them. This Swartt, no matter how great his army, will be defeated and slain by Sunflash. My son carries the blood of Boar the Fighter in his veins, and it was he who helped our warrior Martin.

Abbess Meriam walked alongside her old companion. “But do you not fear or worry for him? she asked.

“AH my life, Meriam. He is too far away for us to do anything for him, but I can dream, and the spirit of Boar will aid him, and that of his sire and great grandsire. Who knows, maybe even the voice of our own warrior Martin may reach my son. How can he lose with such allies to advise him? My only wish is that one day he might walk through our Abbey gates before my seasons have run.

The Abbess felt immensely relieved. “Dont go up to your room yet, Bella, she said. “Stay down for afternoon tea. I will need you to support me in the unpleasant task I must carry out.

Bella stared at Meriam through her crystal glasses. “You have enough to worry about as Abbess of Red wall. 1 feel better today, stronger. Leave the business to me; you will need to comfort and reason with Bryony.

Throughout the afternoon tea, Togget tried his level best to cheer Bryony up, but to no avail. The mousemaid sat stone-faced, neither touching food nor talking to anybeast. There was only Veil that she wanted to see, but the otter Skipperjo had banned all from seeing the ferret, save for himself and those who brought him his meals. Platters of fruit scones, wedges of white nut-studded cheese, blackberry tarts, honey, meadow-cream, new cider, and mint tea passed in front of Bryony, their delicious aromas not even tantalizing her. Two of Redfarls squirrels did a hobjig with a pair of Skipperjos otters, while the molemaid Figgul beat a small drum in time with Sister Withes herbsong. It was all done for the mousemaids benefit, though Bryony paid no attention. Sister Withe got her voice around the tongue twister admirably:

“See all the plants of the woodland are mine,

Gillifiowr, nettle, dock, and columbine;

Good Nature provided these things for my own,

The speedwell, fine cottongrass, and the cockscomb;

They grow and they flourish in sunshine or rain,

Groundsel, rush, hemlock, soapwort, and verbane;

Some in the summer and others in spring,

Whilst others in autumn do cause me to sing;

Yarrow and arrowroot, bracken and bramble,

Pennywort, chervil, marestail, and eyebright,

Teazel and thistle and ivy to ramble,

Whilst lily and violet await morning light.

Mint, borage, fennel, and basil are mine,

Like lavender, rosemary, thyme, and woodbine!

The good Sister took a deep drink of cold mint tea and held a paw to her heart. “Phew! Im glad I dont have to sing that twice!

Nothing seemed to cheer Bryony up, but she leapt to her feet immediately when Jodd poked his head around the doorway of Great Hall.

“Attention, chapsnchapesses, Abbess wants every beast out on the lawn by the gatehouse soon as yve finished vittles! There was an immediate exodus from the tables, with Bryony in the lead, her face a picture of anxiety.

Bella stood on the lower wallsteps by the gatehouse, supported by Abbess Meriam, the owl Wudbeak at their side. Ancient as Bella was, the recent events at her beloved Redwall had driven her to speak. Every Abbey creature sat on the lawn, facing the three. There was a profound silence over the gathering, then heads turned to see Skipperjo and Redfarl escorting Veil from the main Abbey building. Bryony drew in her breath sharply. Jodd was walking in front of the prisoner, but she could see Veils paws were bound in front of him. He jumped and snarled, biting at his guards as they hauled him along to the bottom step.

Bella came forward, spreading her silver-furred paws. “First, let me say that I take responsibility for what will happen here today. Any resentment or grievance you hold must be against me, and not our Mother Abbess. Bella looked directly at Bryony. “Is that clear?

Bryony nodded, looking stricken, and the ancient badger continued. “You see before you a young ferret called Veil. I gave him his name when he was brought to this place many seasons ago. Abbess Meriam, myself, and one other, our friend Bryony, aye, and all of you for that matter, showed him every kindness. The goodbeasts of Redwall helped Veil to grow from a Dibbun to a youngbeast, trying to teach him the values of the life we live here, to honour, help, befriend, and never to harm others. Sadly he ignored all advice and went his own way, lying, cheating, stealing and creating bad feeling among otherbeasts. All this could have been forgiven, and has been countless times in the past. However, now Veil has passed the point of forgiveness. He tried to kill one of us, and there is no absolution whatsoever for a creature who would do this to a Brother or Sister of Redwall. Had he lived among

badgers, who have a far more rigid code, I tell you, he would have been slain instantly. But this is not the way at our Abbey, though nothing as terrible as this has ever before occurred here.

“Therefore I must say something to you, Veil, that has never been said to another creature within these walls so far, and it is a hard thing for me to say. You are no longer one of us: there is no place for you at Redwall; once you are put on the path outside the Abbey, our gates are closed to you for ever. Veil, you must go now. I declare you Outcast!

A cry like that of a wounded animal broke the silence. Bryony dashed forward, trying to get hold of the young ferret. “No, no! Not my Veil. Please, let him stay. Ill look after him, hell change, youll see, Ill talk to him... !

Meriam got to Bryony before she reached Veil; wrapping her in the folds of her gown, the Abbess hugged the mouse-maid tightly. “Hush now, be still, little one, he is a poisoner and would have murdered had he not been stopped. There is nothing more you can do for him!

Veil looked stunned as Jodd cut the bonds from his paws, and he stared at the old badger on the steps, crying, “What about me? Wherell I go now? Ive got no family, Im alone. WhatIl I do?

Seizing both the ferrets paws in a viselike grip, Skipperjo brought his face close and said through gritted teeth, “Little sixclaw the poisoner, eh? I knowed who you was, matey, from the day I picked you up suckin frogspawn in a muddy ditch! Yore the whelp of that other six-clawed vermin, Swartt the Warlord. Aye, the one whos over at Salamandastron mountain right now, fightin the great Badger Lord. Why dont yer travel over thatways, due west and through the mountains, they say, an take a look at some real slayin, or would onest warfare be too noble fer a sneakin poisoner!

Then, dragging Veil by bom paws, the big otter lugged him through the gateway and flung him on the path. “Go an work yore evil someplace else, scum!

As the gates of Redwall slammed shut on him, Veil stood quivering with rage, shaking his six-clawed paw at those inside. “Stupid oafs! he yelled. “Bumblin fools! You aint heard the last o me! See these paws, well, you dyed them red, an red theyll stay, to remind me that someday Ill be back! Aye, with my own horde, Ill tear this Abbey apart, stone by stone, then Ill slay every livin one of you, I prom-ise!

Inside on the lawn, Bella and the Abbess held Bryony close between them as she pleaded, wept, and begged for them to give Veil one last chanceVeil, the ferret she had reared and loved from a babe, despite all his evil ways.

Book Three: The Warriors Reckoning

31

The absolute size and majesty of Salamandastron staggered Swartt Sixclaw when he first saw the mountain. From behind a rocky groyne that stretched lengthwise across the shore, the Warlord sat in counsel with his Captains, while the horde sprawled across the sands, eating, relaxing, and readying their weapons. Zigu could not resist sneering at Swartts strategy, which was to take the mountain from behind in a pincer movement. The Corsair ferret lolled indolently against the rocks, making parries and thrusts at midair, practicing with his long, basket-hilled rapier.

“Zounds! Listen to himattack the mountain from behind. Methinks Ive heard some half-witted schemes in me time, but strewth, thisn takes the biscuit!

Swartt faced the sardonic Corsair, holding his temper level. “Well, you were clever enough tlose yer ship on the rocks, lets ear yer plan ifn you dont like mine, Capn Zigu.

Stung by the barb about the loss of his ship, Zigu sketched a swift plan on the sand with his rapier point. “Right you are, Warlord, heres my scheme. The sea at our back is a natural ally; wait until the last of ebb tide, then form the whole horde up in ranks below the tideline. Obviously the defenders of yon mountain have nothing like the numbers we possess, and mayhap Salamandastron will fall to us by a mere show of power. When they see the might of our horde advancing up the beach, perhaps their nerve will fail.

A murmur of approval rose from the Captains, but Swartt drew a line through Zigus plan with the tip of his curved sword. “What was wrong with my plan, whys yores any better? he said.

Zigu was enjoying his verbal victory over Swartt, whom he considered a savage clod. “The fault with your strategy, my good Warlord, he said condescendingly, “is that we leave our backs unguarded. Who can tell what lies in the hills behind the mountainwe could be attacked by those who are friendly neighbors to the Badger Lord. However, if you

take my way it is a two-edged blade: first, we have nothing to lose by a show of strength; second, it will put fear into the hearts of our enemy.

The horde Captains nodded vigorously; they liked Zigus idea. Swartt gestured at the mountain with his chain-mailed paw. “Fair enough, but what if they aint scared of us, what do we do then, march upndown on the shore lookin fierce? That aint goin to conquer no mountain. Yore plan aint bad, Zigu, but it needs a bit of work doin on it.

The Corsair sheathed his rapier and performed a flourishing bow in Swartts direction. “Be my guest, Sirrah, by all means. Plan away!

Playing him at his own game, Swartt bowed back. “Righto! Ifn they dont come flockin out terrifiednsurrenderin like you say they should, then eres wot we do. Split up an attack, usin the pincer movement I was goin to use from the back, this time at the front, but wid a difference. This time we mount a charge, straightforward at the front entrance, same time as the pincers hit both sides. Now, itll need a clevernfearless beast tlead that frontal charge. Captains, who dyou say it should be?

The Captains replied en masse without hesitation, “Zigu! The Corsair smiled and saluted them with his rapier, inwardly seething that he had allowed himself to be outwitted by Swartt.

The midday sun was at its zenith. Sunflash the Mace stood at his bedchamber window with Colonel Sandgall, Sundew, and Sabretache. Together they watched the seemingly endless ranks of hordebeasts marching out to line up below the tide-line. War drums pounded relentlessly, and conch shell trumpets brayed aloud over the barbaric banners streaming high over glinting spearheads.

Colonel Sandgall watched them coolly through his monocle. “Dyou know, I do believe the blightersve brought enough troops along tmake a decent scrap of it, eh, Tache?

Sabretache the swordhare tutted indifferently. “Tchah! Lets hope they fight bettern they drill, sloppy lot, no right markers, no proper dressin from the right. Id smarten em up if I were their Captain, believe you me!

Sunflash smiled at Sundew. “Afraid, missie? he asked.

She looked up at the Badger Lord, his golden stripe showing through

the open visor of a high black war helmet, massive chest covered by a fine chain-mail tunic, and the great mace balanced easily over his broad shoulder. “Not while youre around, Sire! she said.

Now the horde was fully marshaled with the neap tide protecting their rear and a forest of spears and lances pointing skyward. Hordebeasts stood shoulder to shoulder, covering the whole lower beach, so that not even the sand below the tideline was visible. Swartt came to the forefront, flanked by Zigu and the stoat Captain Aggal. The Warlords face and teeth were freshly stained with bright plant dyes, a multicolored cloak swirled about him, and his heavily chain-mailed sixclaw glittered brighter than the long curved sword thrust into his snakeskin belt. He drew his blade and pointed at Salamandas-tron. That was the signal. The horde began marching slowly forward, splitting into three groups as it did, Swartt leading the left, Aggal the right, and Zigu the center.

Sunflash had sighted his lifelong foe. He hurried from the chamber, threading his way through the mountain passages to the left side, where he knew Swartt was heading. Back in the chamber, Colonel Sandgall took a whistle from his tunic and blew three sharp blasts. The hares of the Long Patrol went into action.

Zigus command were hardly upon the soft sand above the tideline, when the ground rose up in front of them. Thirty hares leaped from a shallow trench covered by sand spread over the top of rush matsthese were the Sleepers that Sand-gall had spoken of. They sprang up from hiding when the front line of vermin was less than twenty paces away. A wild cry went up as they launched javelins into the front marchers.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

Completely taken by surprise, half the front rank were slain. Hedgepaw and her Sleepers fled back to the mountain, taking care to leap over the disguised trench that contained the sharpened stakes. Zigu flung himself to one side, avoiding the rain of javelins, then, leaping upright, he drew his rapier.

“After them. Charge!

The words had scarcely left his mouth, when the sand another score of paces away heaved upward. Bradberry spat out grit as he called to his two dozen archers, “Quickfire, chaps!

Again Zigus lightning reactions saved him. Flinging himself flat, he heard the screams and felt the thudding weight of two horde soldiers

as they fell dead on top of him. Pushing the bodies roughly aside, the Corsair sprang up, and, grabbing a spear from one of the slain vermin, he hurled it at the fleeing backs of the retreating Sleepers. It was a lucky throw. Ford-petal, the young female hare with the fluttering eyelashes, went down with a scream, the spear sticking out of her back.

Zigu looked around for another spear to throw as the hordebeasts charged past him. Fifty paces farther on they vanished into the covered stakepits; agonized yells rent the hot air as vermin soldiers plunged onto the sharpened stakes.

Zigu roared at those still alive, “Back! Back, you fools, cant you see its a trap?

As they retreated, the Corsair ran to where Fordpetal lay groaning. His face tight with rage, Zigu lashed at her with the long blade of his rapier.

“Hit and run, eh, hare! Well, Im hitting now, lets see you run!

She screamed as he lashed her mercilessly with the thin blade.

“Hey, filthface, why doncha try doin that to somebeast who can hit back!

Zigu looked up to see the Long Patrol Captain Sabretache striding purposefully toward him. The Corsair grinned evilly, calling to his hordebeasts, “Leave this one to me, he carries a blade!

Ignoring the gaping hordebeasts, Sabretache leapt the stake-pit. Drawing his saber, he confronted Zigu.

Nobeast had ever bested the Corsair in swordfight. Flexing the long steel blade between his paws, he stared contemptuously at the hare, who stood alone before him, and said, “Zounds, youre a bold bunny and no mistake. Come and be spitted!

The hare shot forward, his narrow curving saber striking the rapier blade with a force that sent shockwaves tingling through his opponents paw. He smiled recklessly. “Defend yself, ferret!

Balancing lightly on their footpaws, both beasts took up the en garde position, sword points flickering like snake tongues as each sought an opening. Momentarily the front shore of Salamandastron grew silent. Hordebeasts on the sand and defenders from the mountain stood stock

still, watching the two swordbeasts battle to the death.

Zigu pressed forward, step, step, step, his rapier seeking the elusive foe. Sabretache backed and went sideways, the saber a bright blur as it slashed and took the ferrets ear. Scarcely believing what had just happened, Zigu clapped a paw to the side of his head, glaring venomously at the hare. One paw behind his back, Sabretache stood with his legs bowed, saber in the salute position as he kissed its hilt. “Can ystill hear me, old chap, hard luck, wot?

With a roar of rage, Zigu charged, flailing the rapier in front of him. The two blades met, and sand flew about their nimble footpaws as they locked in a dance of death. Blade clashed upon blade as they battled across the beach. Zigu managed to grab Sabretaches swordpaw with his free one, and as the hare pulled away, the Corsair struck a downward slash at his head, hissing triumphantly.

“Sssssdeath!

Sabretache flicked his head to one side, avoiding the blade slicing at his throat. He came up smiling, running a paw along the fine scar tracing his cheek.

“Not quite, old lad, try again, eh!

Zigu plunged forward once more, but the hare was ready. Locking hilts with the ferret, he wrenched down and gave a powerful twist upward. The rapier described a glittering arc in the noon sun as it left Zigus paw, then a swift kick to the stomach left the Corsair sprawling, unarmed. Sabretache leaned on his saber as if it were a walking stick, and he nodded toward the rapier as the horrified ferret scrambled to get out of blade range. “Pick it up, vermin!

Zigu was scared; he knew he was facing a swordmaster, but the Corsair stilt had a trick or two in him. Reaching down to retrieve his blade, he snatched up a pawful of sand and hurled it in his opponents face. As Sabretaches paw shot up to his eyes. Zigu bulled forward, throwing himself upon his foe. and they went down together. However, the hare was nol finished. His long legs shot out like two pistons, catching the ferret in his stomach and sending him flying over Sabretaches head. He landed with a bump that winded him. The hare was up; pawing sand from his eyes he went for the ferret. Zigu staggered upright in time to raise his blade, but not to stop the lightning attack. He staggered backward, blade clashed upon blade as, thrusting, hacking, and swinging, the hare drove his foe skillfully

around the stakepit, maneuvering the ferret until he was backed up to a rock. Then both blades locked, saber guard against basket hilt. Eye to eye, whisker to whisker, and jaw to jaw they swayed.

Panic glistened in Zigus eyes; he had met his match. Gasping for breath, he pleaded for his life, “Sirrah, a boon, a boon, spare me!

There was no mercy in the face of the Long Patrol Captain. He knocked the rapier to one side and thrust forward with the curving sabertip. “You ask for mercy, ferret? You who moments ago whipped a wounded creature with your blade! Tchah! You have lived the life of a coward, now learn tdie like a soldier, sir!

Zigu slid lifeless to the sand. Sabretache tucked the sword beneath his elbow like a pace stick and marched boldly off. While the fight had been in progress, Bradberry and Blogg-wood had sneaked out and retrieved Fordpetals body.

Aggal and his band came marching around to the sloping right side of the mountain. It was completely deserted. The stoat Captain had expected to meet some resistance, but there was nothing, just a solid rock face soaring upward, with no sign of entry visible, A weasel called Bandril shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment and said, “Well, were ere! Wot dwe do now, Capn?

Aggal cuffed the hapless weasel a quick clip over his ear. “Do, what dyer think we do, peabrain? We climb up an try tfind a way in, o course. Now git climbin, all of yeh!

Encumbered by spears, shields, and various weapons, the hordebeasts began clambering, not too enthusiastically, up the rockface. Aggal was well ahead of the rest, energetically scaling upward and calling back in a loud whisper, “If we kin find us a window or some way in, well battle our way down tthe main entrance an unblock it fer Capn Zigu.

Bandril lagged at the back of the climbers, waiting for an even tardier rat to catch up with him. “Cmon yew, move yerself, he called down. “Keep yer eyes peeled fer entrances!

The rat gave him a withering glance and climbed slower. “Entrances, ymust be daft as a bat if you think Im goin to climb inside o there, the place is fulla badgers anares!

Bandril sat down on a grass-covered ledge. “Yore like me-self, mate, not soft!

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High up and hidden from view, Forty and an old campaigner called Floke risked a quick peep over the edge at the vermin climbing upward.

Floke squinted. “Do yer think theyre sufficiently far enough hup, master Forty? Yore hossifer material, hits yore decision.

Forty scratched his chubby stomach reflectively and looked up from the climbing vermin to the huge pile of boulders artfully held in position by one long aspenwood wedge. “Hard tsay, really; actually I think its a bit thick layin decisions on my doorstep, old chap. I mean, youre supposed to be senior wallah round here.

Floke placed his footpaw against the wedge. “Well, yore a right young corker, you are, master Forty. Colonel Sandgall said you was trainee hossifer in charge o this hoperation, yore supposed tgive the blinkin orders!

Forty made a face. He felt hungry and peeved. “Oh, right ho then, its jolly hot out here an Im starvin. Away wedge, Floke, an thats an order!

The older hare chuckled. “Thats wot hl likes ter see, a young hossifer in command.

One swift kick from Flokes footpaw sent the wedge sailing into space, closely followed by a great shower of boulders.

Aggal pawed sweat from his eyes as he shielded them and peered upward. “Bound ter be a openin up there... Yaaaaaamrgh!

Had not the boulders bounced out from the face, there would have been total slaughter among the climbers, but as it was nearly half their number were wiped out by the falling rocks, Aggal being the first to go.

Floke watched the scene from his high perch, shaking his head and muttering, “Serve youse right for attackin us in the first place, aint that right, master Forty. Master Forty, sir?

But the hungry young hare had gone inside, never having once missed afternoon tea since his hero, Lord Sunflash, had introduced it a couple

of seasons back.

Sunflash was down and waiting in the shelter of the base at the mountains left side. He watched as the hordebeasts rounded a bend in the rock. Suddenly he saw Swartt, as usual, letting the others go in front of him. All the Badger Lords previous plans deserted him at the sight of his hated enemy; Sunflash felt the bloodwrath rise within his brain. Throwing caution to the four winds, he swung his club and came charging out of cover.

“Eeulaliaaaaaaa!

It was a frightening sight to the foebeasts; a giant badger clad in chain mail, helm, and wielding a mace the like of which few of them had ever seen. They turned and ran, Swartt with them. Roaring his war cry, Sunflash pursued them recklessly.

Sabretache was back up at the chamber window with Colonel Sandgall and Sundew, all of them watching the progress of the battle on me shore below. Zigus command had been taken over by a weasel called Bleeknose, an active, quick thinker. He had led his troops into the stake trench, where they had smashed the wooden spikes, piling them with the carcasses of the slain on the edge of the trench and covering them with sand. The result was a good trench fronted by earthworks, from which the horde could send arrows, spears, or slingstones against the mountain defenders.

Colonel Sandgall sent a dispatch runner to the lower windows and openings. “Tell the squads tcome up here, perfect spot for shootin down into that trench, wot. All the harder for the bally vermin to send blinkin missiles this far up. What dyou say,Tache, old lad?

Sabretache groaned aloud at what he saw below. “Oh my giddy aunt, take a look at this, sah!

There was Sunflash, alone and unprotected out on the shore, roaring his defiance in the face of me enemy. Swartt had fled almost to the sea, leaving most of the horde as a barrier between himself and his foe.

Sandgall squinched his brow down hard on his monocle. “Instant calamity, wot! Lordships goin tget imself massacred, theres enough vermin down there tkill ten badgers! Bloodwrath or no blinkin bloodwrath, theyll ave im. Calls for swift action, Tache, jump to it!

Sundew stared anxiously at the lone figure down on the shore.

“Theyre shootin arrows at him! she cried.

Swartt was angry with himself. He had come all this way for vengeance, only to turn tail and run at the sight of Sunflash. Breathlessly he splashed through the shallows to the line of rocks that stretched from shore to sea.

Nightshade could see what had taken place, and artfully she soothed the Warlords bruised ego. “Nobeast could stand against the badger in his madness, Sire. You did well to escape him; besides, I know you want to take him alive so that you may have your revenge bit by bit, you always said that.

The ferret ceased pounding his mailed paw against the rocks and looked hopefully at his seer. “Youve got a plan, vixen, tell me!

“Well snare him like a fish in a net, Lord.

“Fool, where is there a net big enough to old im? We dont ave any such net.

“No, but we still have a few big tent canvases....

The Warlords face split into a huge grin. “Of course! E cant club is way through canvas. Once we bag the badger, those aresll fold like dead bark!

Sunflash was beset on all sides. He whirled and roared in a fury, unable to get at his attackers. The vermin kept their distance, slinging rocks and firing arrows. The heavily meshed mail tunic and iron war helmet were weighing the Badger Lord down, but he could not chance removing them. His paws sank deep in the soft sand, and, bellowing and howling, he shook the big mace.

“Eeulaliaaaaaa!

Rocks and shafts clanged and thudded against the enraged Badger Lord. The vermin circled like small vicious predators trying to bring down a big beast, hurling their missiles and keeping out of his range. Sand was in every crevice of his chain mail. The iron helmet, hot from the suns rays, caused sweat to trickle over Sunflashs head, into his mouth, down his ears, blinding and stinging his maddened eyes. Nowhere through the small visor slits could he see his enemy, Swartt. He began floundering, and an arrow thudded deep into his unprotected paw. With a roar he tore the shaft out and, snapping it in two, he hurled it at his unseen tormentors. A spear raked his footpaw

as he lifted it from the entrapping sand. Blundering and staggering, he tottered toward the rocks, not knowing in which direction he was moving.

Then the canvases trapped him like a great fish in a net.

Suddenly Sunflash felt the enveloping weight fall on him, driving him down on all fours into the sand. Everything went dark. As he fought blindly against the tough, unyielding canvas, he could vaguely hear Swartts voice.

“Keep those blades away, I want im alive! Jump on that canvas, pile sand on itweve got im!

Completely stifled and overburdened, the badgers heimeted head hit the soft sand, his senses swimming as he fought for breath.

33

It was an hour after dawn when Abbess Meriam discovered Bryony had left the Abbey. Sadly, she sat on the empty truckle bed, looking at the disarrayed sheets and touching the dented pillow where her friends head had lain.

Meriam read again the note that Bryony had left, “Redwall will not be the same without our little flower, she whispered, and turned to see Bella standing in the doorway.

“Alas, no, my heart will be heavy each time I see her empty place at table, said the ancient silver badger as she sat beside Meriam on the bed. “Do you think she will ever return?

“Oh, yes. One day when Bryony is older and wiser we will see her walking back through our gates, of that I am sure. Then the Abbesss paw clenched and her voice became harsh. “Unless some bad fate befalls her as she follows Veiltrouble pursues that vermin like winter follows autumn. A young maid alone ... we should send someone after her.

Bella rose slowly. “No, Meriam, she said gravely. “The path that Bryony follows was marked out for her by fate and seasons long ago. All we can do now is send our hearts and feelings out to her, wherever she is.

Bella leaned on Meriams paw, and the two friends quit the deserted room, which seemed emptier than it had ever been before.

Grasshoppers chirruped their ceaseless dry cadence; somewhere high in the cloudless blue a skylark trilled; bees droned busily from kingcup to meadow saffron, and butterflies perched upon scabious flowers, their wings like small, still sails on the calm air. Bryony stopped awhile, enjoying the feel of dry curling grass underpaw as she got her bearings. The sun was still easterly and climbing toward high noon. She moved until it was against her right shoulder, striding off after Veil. She had overheard Skipperjos challenge to the ferret and knew that the great mountain lay somewhere due west.

It took Byrony some time to shake off the feeling of depression she had encountered when leaving Redwall. All morning she kept looking back at the Abbey, watching it diminish in size as she got farther

away. Finally she crossed a long rolling hill and Redwall was lost to sight. The mousemaid knew what she must do: find Veil and bring him back, even (bough he had been made Outcast and sent away. Bryony had been forming her own plans for both of them. Her Mossflower friends would help; together they would build a small dwelling in the woodland, close to Redwall. There she would live with Veil, teaching him to behave well and showing all at Redwall how he had changed for the good. Maybe, just maybe, Bella would one day regret her decision and allow Veil to return to the Abbey. Cheered up by these thoughts and her resolute optimism, Bryony strode onward, singing an old Abbey ballad.

“I search for the summer oer fields far and still,

Though seasons may take me wherever they will,

Cross vale and oer hill as the warm winds blow down,

Twas there I found autumn gold, russet, and brown.

I wandered the lands neath a misty morn sky.

Til the frost rimed a small icy tear from my eye.

O winter, cold winter turns short days to night.

And dresses the lea in a gown of pure white.

So windswept and sad until yon comes the day,

A pale morn of sunlight melts snowflakes away.

See greenshoots a-pushing to pierce the bare earth,

Bringing fair-colored flowers to herald springbirth,

As spinney and woodland grow leafier each day,

Young birds sing that summer is soon on its way.

Ill find me the glade that my heart recalls best,

In my soft summer dell I will lay down to rest.

It was midnoon before Bryony decided to take a break and eat something. Choosing a shaded patch on the side of a broken hill, she sat down and opened her haversack. Pouring pen-nycloud cordial into

her beaker, she selected a russet apple and recalled helping to store the apples in dry straw at the end of the previous autumns harvest. It was only when she took out one of Friar Bunfolds home-baked oat scones from the pack that emotions overcame her. There was nobeast around to see, so the mousemaid gave full rein to her grief, weeping unashamedly as she drank cordial and ate her scone. Memories of Redwall flooded over her like spring tide hitting a dry beach. Teardrops spattered onto the half-bitten apple and dampened her traveling habit.

“Er, hrumm, hrumm, Ill ave that if ydont like it, mouse!

She looked up to see a very fat robin watching her. It nodded at the scone. “Ydont ave to eat that if n it makes ycry. Give it tme, yll fee! appier, I know ywill.

Bryony tried wiping her eyes on her sleeve, but the tears kept rolling down unchecked. She broke off a piece of the scone and tossed it to the robin. “H ... h ... here, n ... now g ... go way and leave m ... m ... me!

The robin pecked at the scone critically, bobbing its head. “Mmm, mm, very tasty, very nice. Gone an give yself hiccups now, avent you, should never whinge while eatin, bad fyou!

Bryony turned her head away, still trying to stem the tears. “Im n ... not whinging, j ...just 1... leave m ... me alone p ... please! She broke off another piece of scone and gave it to the nosy bird.

Huffily he seized it and fluttered off slowly. “Chipp! Not very good company, are ymouse?

Bryony got her hiccups under control and shouted after the bird, “You didnt see a ferret pass this way, by any chance?

The robin flew swiftly back, eating his piece of scone before he ventured a reply. “Might ave. Give me the rest o that cake an Ill tell you. Cakes no good tyou, ony makes ycry.

Bryony passed over the remainder of the scone. The robin began pecking it thoughtfully, head to one side.

“Got any more o these in that bag?

The mousemaid sniffled away the last of her tears angrily. “No, I have not. Now will you please tell me if you saw the ferret pass this way!

The robin nodded. “Yes, ferret passed this way las ev-enin.

“Well, which way did he go, please?

One wing shot out pointing west and slightly south, the exact direction in which Bryony was traveling.

“That way! Bye-bye, crymouse!

He flew off fast, with Bryony shouting after him, “And good-bye to you, greedybeak!

Suddenly the mousemaid felt drained and tired, exhausted by the long walk and her emotions. Curling up, she fell asleep in the twinkling of an eye.

A breeze, or an insect, or something tickling her whiskers brought Bryony back to wakefulness. Slowly, she opened one eye. Immediately she closed it, fear making her lie very still. There, in front of her eye, she had seen a huge flat paw with big blunt claws.

“Wake ee oop, missie, et be only oi!

Pushing the footpaw away from within a hairs-breadth of her face, she sat bolt upright, crying, “Togget! What are you doing here?

The mole wrinkled his button nose and shrugged. “Watchen ee sleepen, yurr, youm an orful snoarer, Broinee.

Bryony stood up, brushing herself off indignantly. “I do not snore!

Togget put down his haversack, chuckling. “Ahurrhurrhurr, thats cos ee never bed awake to ear eeself, ow youm knowen ifn youm snoar ifn ee be asleepen?

The mousemaid stamped her footpaw. “Never mind whether I snore or not. I asked you what, pray, are you doing out here? Why did you leave the Abbey?

Togget took her paw. “Youm moi gudd friend, missie. Togget wuddent leave ee to go off a surchin for ee maister Veil all alone, burr no!

Bryony seized Togget and hugged him. “Youre a true friend, Togget, a good, loyal companion. Thank you!

Togget covered his face with his great digging paws, as moles will do when embarrassed by anything. “Hurr, oill go straightways back to ee

habbey ifn youm goin to be a squeezin anuggin oi!

Bryony understood, and without another word the two friends set off together, traveling southwest.

It was evening, still light, but getting on to dusk, and Veil was hungry. The ferret had eaten only a few young dandelion shoots and some edible roots all day. Sucking a flat pebble to ward off thirst, he carried on across the darkening landscape. After a while he noticed a faint glow from some hills, to the north of his route and, overcome by curiosity, he sneaked silently over. As he drew nearer the hill, he could tell the glow was being made by a fire in a small hollow at the hills base. Flattening himself belly down against the grass, the ferret wriggled forward quietly. When he was close enough, he lifted his head and looked.

It was an old male dormouse with two little ones, sitting around the fire roasting apples. To one side lay a homely looking cottage loaf and a big wedge of dark yellow cheese. Veil noted that the old dormouse carried a knife, which he used to cut the bread, and that there was also a stout walking staff at his side. Veil walked into the firelight with both paws spread wide and a disarming smile upon his face.

“Pray, friends, dont alarm yourselves, he said, keeping his voice soft and low. “I come in peace.

The old dormouse inspected him critically. “In peace, aye, an in hunger, too, by the looks of ye. Sit ye down, there aint much, but yore welcome tshare supper with menthe grand-mice. Last bad winter took their parents, an Im the only one left to look after em, pore mites. Were travelers, livin where we can, starvin when we have to.

Veil sat opposite the oldster, accepting a slice of cheese, a hunk of the loaf, a roasted apple, and a large seashell filled with water from a flask. He ate gratefully, improvising a pack of lies to the kind dormouse.

“My names Bunfold. Im the same as your little ones, lost my mother V father, aye, an a sister, too, last winter. Ive been on my own ever since, wanderin field an forest.

The old dormouse stared into the flames. “The babes are called Hoffy an Brund, same as their parents. Im Ole Hoffy. AIT, Bunfold, tis a hard life for porebeasts without a dwellin place. See the little ones are asleep already, wore out just like their paws from trekkin an livin rough. Here, young un, cover yself with this against the night chills.

He dug out a ragged blanket from a bark carrier and tossed it to Veil. The ferret wrapped himself up and snuggled down, saying, “Sleep well, Ole Hoffy. Who knows, mayhap tomor-rowll bring us all good fortune an a bit o luck, eh?

The dormouse threw some twigs on the fire before settling. “We could certainly do with it. Gnight, Bunfold!

Veil lay with his eyes half closed, listening to the crackle of the fire and waiting for his chance.

Togget was awake before Bryony the next day, unpacking food for them both from the haversack he had made up before leaving the Abbey. Picking a kingcup, he placed it gently between the mousemaids folded paws.

“Wake ee oop, tis a bran new day, Or oill eat all ee vittles an run away!

Bryony sat up, staring at the flower. “Where did this come from?

Togget busied himself slicing cold deepernever pie. “Ow shudd oi know, missie, et be thoi own biznuss if youm want to roam roun al! noight a-picken flowers, hurr aye!

Bryony curtsied prettily to her molefriend. Thank you, sir. Ooh! Deepernever pie with dandelion-and-burdock cordial. What a good breakfast!

They dallied awhile after the meal, enjoying the bright summer morn. Then, packing their gear, Bryony and Togget set off, still trekking southwest. About midmorn they reached the top of a high grassy hill and stopped momentarily to enjoy the breeze.

The mousemaid looked around. “You know, if this hill were any higher Til bet I could see the tip of Redwall Abbey from here. Its not that far away, really, only just over a days journey.

Togget was looking the other way. Shading his eyes against the sun, he peered southwest before scanning all the land around. “Yurr, missie, lookit, thurr be somebeasts a wanderin oer yon!

Bryony looked hard in the direction he was pointing; she could make out a huddle of dark shapes. “Well, I dont think it could be Veil, hed be traveling the wrong way. Can you make out how many of them there are?

Togget had exceptionally good eyes, for a mole. “Lukks foik two, nay three, aye, et be three. Yurr, wot if n they be foebeasts or villyuns?

Bryony decided that they should lie flat so that the other-beasts could not easily see them. Stretched out on the hilltop, they watched until the trio drew closer. Bryony stood up. “Theyre dormice. Looks like two of them are only small. Come on, Togget, they wont harm us. Lets find out what theyre doing in this country.

The two little dormice were weeping piteously, clinging to the blanket draped about Ole Hoffys shoulders. He had a wound on his head, crusted with dried blood around a swelling lump. Staggering crazily toward Bryony and Togget, he fell, pushing the babes from him as he toppled over.

Bryony was at his side in an instant. “Oh, you poor thing! What happened? she cried. Dampening a cloth, she bathed the dormouses head as he relayed a halting account of the previous night.

“Ferret, “said his name was Bunfold, camped with us, gave him supper an a blanket to sleep. Mustve rolled over an burnt my paw in th fire embers, woke me up this mornin, head achin, food gone, knife an1 staff gone too. Huh, ferret gone an all!

Bryony looked at Togget and shook her head. “Bunfold! That could only be Veil. Build a fire and take care of the babes, Togget. Ill see what I can do for this old fellow. Hmm, hes not badly injured. He should be all right.

Togget issued the little dormice with a slice of deepernever pie apiece and some dandelion-and-burdock cordial. He also dug out a packet of candied chestnuts for them. They had not eaten since the previous night, and both fell gratefully upon the food.

The mole patted their heads. “Baint much wrong wi these two gurt rascals, theym a vittlin oop loik a pair oare-beasts!

Bryony soon had Ole Hoffy feeling better; she cleaned and dressed his wound and fed him. He told her of his life so far and the hard times he had experienced with the two babes. And the mousemaid came up with a solution that would solve all the dormouses problems.

“You must carry on walking east for a day, or a bit more, and then you will see a path. Once on that path you will be close to Redwall Abbeygo there with your babes. Tell the Mother Abbess Meriam that Bryony sent you. Redwall Abbey is a place where all goodbeasts are

welcome; you may live there in peace and plenty. The babes will be brought up well, never again knowing hunger or want. You will all find the love of good friends there. Have a safe journey, and fortune attend you and your grandmice, Ole Hoffy.

The dormouse did a little jig, surprising for one of his long seasons, then he bowed to the two friends as he took the babes paws. “Good comes out o bad, some say. Last night that villain wished me good fortunenIuck on the morrow. Whod have thought that a bad ferrets wish brought menthe babes good!

Calling loud farewells, they went their separate ways, but not before Bryony and Togget had donated one of their food haversacks to the dormice, more than enough to see them to the Abbey.

There was no talk of Veil between the two friends. Bryony set her face and refused to discuss what he had done to the good dormice. In silence the two set off, tracking the ferret once more.

Veil was back on the southwest trail again. Armed with a knife, staff, and food, he had cut the blanket up to make a cloak for himself. Finding a patch of wild strawberries, he ate as many as he could, streaked his face and renewed the red on his paws with the juice, then stamped the remainder into the ground until the strawberry patch was a sludge of red fruit and bruised leaves. Blissfully unaware that Bryony and Togget were less than a day behind him, he strolled off in search of the great mountain of Salamandastron and the father he had never known. He wondered occasionally if his parent, the one called Swartt, was as cunning and tough as himself. Mentally Veil wagered that he wasnt.

Sunflash the Mace was down. Vermin crowded to jump and stamp on the sand-heaped canvas bundle, screaming and yelling with triumph. Swartt stood imposingly on top of the rock groyne, hero of the hour. Up at the chamber window, Colonel Sandgall leaned far out over the sill, anxiously watching the threshold of the main mountain entrance.

Sundew stood alongside the Colonel, beating the rock sill with her paws. The young hare was trembling and sobbing. “Oh, help him, help him! Where are they?

Sandgall replied without looking at her, “Steady in the ranks, mgel, stiff upper lip an dont let the side down, wot. By thunder! Here they comelisten!

A band of hares came bursting through the main entrance, Sabretache

at the head, swinging his long saber like a drum majors baton. Two stout Captains, Fleetrunn and Rockleg, flanked him, and behind them bounded fifty hares of the famous regiment, all armed with lances and slingshots, loaded with iron lumps from the forge.

“Long Patrol, give em bloodnvinegar! Eeulaliaaaa!

Soaring through the air like hungry eagles, they cleared the horde-filled trench in a mighty leap and went crashing into the midst of the startled vermin who were surrounding Sunflash. Swartt vanished down the far side of the rocks and ran toward the sea as if pursued by demons.

Hordebeasts fell like leaves before a winter gale. The veteran warriors of Salamandastron took no prisoners; javelins flashed in the sunlight, and metal-filled slings thudded savagely into their targets. Sabretache took a tattooed rat through his midriff with the saber, yelling as he did, “Cut through the canvasfree Lord Sunflash!

Swiftly the vermin who were left alive fled, and a tight circle of hares, javelins pointing outward, surrounded the big canvas bundle. Then keen-edged hare-blades sliced the canvas to shreds. Sabretache and his Captains pulled Sunflash from his stifling prison. The badger was limp and unconscious; Reetrunn was at his side, unhinging the helmet roughly. Supporting the Badger Lords head, she called to Bloggwood, “Bring water, hurry!

Swartt had regained his courage. Gathering a crowd of hordebeasts, he led them up the back of the rock groyne and around to the front of the mountain. They massed across the big rough timber gate at the main entrance, blocking the way back into the fortress.

Swartt issued orders to his archers in the trench further down the sands. “Dont let em pass, drive em down to the sea with yore arrows! He turned his attention to his own group. “About face an give those in the mountain plenty o rocks an shafts. Thatll keep their heads down!

The Warlord was trembling with frustration. He had almost taken Sunflash and won the battle; but the badger would not elude him a second time. The ferrets plan was simple and good: Once he had the Badger Lord and his hares up to their waists in seawater, he could slay them at his leisure.

34?

Fresh water splashing over the gold-striped face brought Sunflash slowly back to his senses. Bruised, scarred, and weakened, he lay still, allowing Fleetrunn to pour the life-giving water over his head.

The female hare Captain allowed him a few sips. “Let it wash over you, Sire. Dont drink too much or yll feel-pretty bad. Thats the ticketjust wet ymouth, eh.

Sabretache rapped out commands as a hare fell beside him, slain by a barbed shaft. “Keep yheads down! Back up to the rocks, troops, theyre shootin at us from that flippin trench!

Dragging Sunflash with them, the Long Patrol hares fought their way to the line of rocks stretching from the mountain to the sea. Swiftly digging the sand with their long legs, they formed a temporary barricade, a low sandy hump between themselves and the vermin archers. Arrows hissed viciously, some burying their points in the sand, others hitting the rock, while some found targets among the beleaguered hares.

Colonel Sandgall had to draw back from the window: Arrows and slingstones from Swartts hordebeasts were whistling through the opening, ricocheting around the chamber.

He sniffed disdainfully and, adjusting his monocle, he waggled one long ear at Sundew. “Out ygo, missie, no sense in gettin yself injured here, wot. Go an make yself useful elsewheres, theres a good gel.

Sundew had collected the slingstones that came in, and now she was sending them out with a vengeance. Whirling her own sling, she dashed at the window and hurled down a quick one at those below. “Im stayin here with you, sah, she said. “They wont make me shift!

Sandgall took a bow from a wallpeg and, notching one of the fallen shafts to its string, he nipped smartly to the window and fired, nodding as he was rewarded by a scream from below. “Good gel! True bluennever fail, eh! Come on, lets return fire with their own gear. Long time since I put ash to yew an twine. Never forget the old skillsgood show! Squinting through his monocle, he loosed another arrow.

Sabretache crouched low with Rockleg at his side, assessing their

perilous situation. “Looks bad, old chum, the blighters have got us well pinned down here. Not much chance of get-tin back to the jolly old mountain either, just look at that evil rabble all ganged up in front of the main gate! Absolute rotters!

Rockleg twitched an ear in the direction of the sea. “Right yare, Tache, ysee their strategy, doncha, they want to drive us down to the water, stop us gettin back to the mountain. Huh, look at that dirty great mob of vermin waitin for us on the waterline. Bad show if yask me. Theyve got us trapped here like frogs in a bucket!

Sabretache flicked his head to one side as an arrow whizzed by. “Well just have tsit it out, old boy, wait until Lord Sun-flash is up t the mark again an hope for some sort of a miracle tpull our chestnuts out of the fire, wot.

Sunflash had begun to tear at the confining chain mail tunic; Fleetrunn tried to hold his massive paws still. “Best leave it on, Sire, she said. “Better feelin a bit uncomfortable than bein stuck all over with arrows.

As if to confirm her words, a shaft glanced off the chain mail and buried itself in the sand. She winked at the badger. “No disrespect, Sire, but ysee what I mean now!

Evening shades began to fall; the hot day cooled with a breeze from the incoming tide. Still trapped against the rocks, the hares crouched and waited. The arrows and slingstones had slowed somewhat, though now the horde in the trench were sniping, taking more careful aim. It was a frustrating and dangerous time. Rockleg poked his head over the sandy barricade and took a quick peek seaward.

“Oh, dash it all! he groaned. “That lot down by the water are startin to sneak up here. Stand by, chaps, I think were about to be ambushed shortly. Itll soon be darkthats when theyll come. He licked a wound on his shoulder and poured dry sand on to seal it.

“ Logalogalogalogaloooooooog!

Sabretaches ears shot up. “Whatn the fur was that?

Sunflash struggled upward and grabbed his mace. “Its the Guosim shrews! Theyve arrived by sea!

“Guosim, Guosim, Guosim! Logalogalogaloooooog!

Rockleg pointed with his javelin. “Look, theyre givin those blighters down by the water a hard time of it. Up here, chaps! Up here!

Sabretache turned toward the mountain. “Hurrah! he cheered. “Look, theres a gang of ottersnsquirrels batterin the livin daylights out of the vermin!

A great roar went up from the warriors at the mountain front.

“Heyaaah! Hoyaaah! Firjak Greenstone! Whump! Whump! Whump!

The otters and squirrels had come around the mountain from both sides, hurling themselves on both flanks of Swartts hor-debeasts with clubs and spears. Guosim shrews charged up from the tideline, cutting a swathe through the vermin pack with flashing rapiers.

With the blood of his ancestors rising in his veins, Sunflash came bulling out at the head of the hares. Joined by the shrews, they went crashing heedlessly over the heads of the trench archers, scattering vermin left and right.

Swartt took flight once again, and the demoralized hordebeasts broke and fled, rushing straight to the safety of the rocks or the tide shallows. The rough-timber gates swung open. Sun-flash stood by them, brandishing his mace until everybeast was inside and safe. Sentries were posted at every lookout post to watch the horde, while the rest crowded into the banqueting hall.

Food was rushed in to the returning warriors and their allies, the best that Salamandastron could serve. Mounds of pasties and great barrels of Mountain Ale, thick seasoned stews, crusty hot bread, and new cider were carried to the tables, and full justice was done to the victuals that night.

Sunflash sat with Colonel Sandgall, Log a Log, the two otters, Folrig and Ruddle, Sabretache, and the other Captains. Sandgall wagged a reproving paw at the Badger Lord. “Ahem, Sire, yll kindly let us know before you go chargin off again to take on a whole filthy horde single-pawed.

Sunflash shook his head, as if disapproving of himself. “Im sorry, Colonel, but I am not myself sometimes.

Sandgall winked at the badger and patted his paw. “Hmm, the ol bloodwrath, wot! Its that an a Badger Lord thatve kept these shores an this country safenfree, dont apologize for it, sah. But us hare chaps are

here tprotect you as much as you protect us, so its nice tbe able treturn the favor. Now then, Log a shrew an you otter types, that was a bally clever show you put up out there today, eh!

Log a Log explained how it had come about. “It was simple, really. We arranged it among ussent out a few spies to see what was goin on, then we put a plan together. I landed the logboats further up the coast before sunset and we waded along through the shallows, round the rocks an charged em. My call was the signal to attack.

Folrig took up his side of the campaign. “We came in from the backway, menole ugly mug Ruddle with Lady Firdance an her gang....

Firdance, a big rangy squirrel with a deep scar running from ear to nosetip, interrupted in her husky voice, “Aye, we split up an worked the old pincer movement, caught the scum nicely in between an gave em some buryin f do!

Bloggwood caught Sunfiashs eye. He sidled over and whispered in the Badger Lords ear. “Sire, can yer comeV ave a word or two with Bradders? Pore feller, es proper cut up about Fordpetal.

“Why, certainly, friendwhats up with Fordpetal?

“Foller me an Ill show yer, Sire.

Sunflash excused himself from the company and followed Bloggwood; they threaded their way through the packed hall. As they went the banter of old warrior friends having a reunion was thick upon the air.

“Gully, yold treeflyer. I thought you was slain seasons ago!

“Well, Im still here, matey, an eatin aplenty tprove it!

“Haharr, Munga, ow is the shrew logboat business goin?

“Saves gettin your paws wet like you otters, Reedtail.

“Ahoy there, Floke, we pulled yore chestnuts out of the fire just in time for yer today, didnt we?

“Aye, matey, an yer cracked a few nuts on the other side too!

It was cold and silent in the vaults beneath the mountain where Bloggwood led Sunflash. They went through to a long torchlit cave where the hares who had been slain in battle that day were laid out on stone slabs, each one wreathed in fresh mountain flowers.

Bradberry was standing by the body of Fordpetal, his head bowed. Sunflash dismissed his guide with thanks and went straight to the young hare.

He placed a paw comfortingly around Bradberrys shoulders. “Bradders, Im sorry, I didnt know ...

The hare buried his face in Sunflashs chain mail tunic and wept. “She wasnt really soppy, was she, Sire?

The Badger Lord swallowed hard. “No, just young and very pretty, and she knew we were only joking when we said that. Lets hope that we have somebeast as thoughtful and tenderhearted as yourself to weep for us some day.

The young hare turned his tearstained face up to Sunflash. “Why do creatures have to have wars and kill one another? Why cant everybeast live in peace and be contented? I was just thinkin before you came, Sire, Fordpetal wont ever see another summer day or laugh an smile again. Why?

Sunflash led Bradberry slowly away from the vault. “Why? Its a question Ive often asked myself, Bradders, particularly when the life of a young one is wasted. Over quite a few seasons now Ive found myself wanting to be only a farmer and grow things, but there are evil ones in the lands. One day when all the evil is gone, maybe then well be able to find peace and watch things grow. Until then it is up to the good ones, like yourself, to fight against evil. Fordpetal was doing just that today. War is a terrible thing, but until something arrives to stop the fighting, we must endure it and battle harder to make sure that good wins.

In the banqueting hall the warriors were singing an age-old song they always sang after battle.

“Oh heres to the comrades who fought the good fight,

On the field where their valor was won.

They gave their lives hard to defend what was right,

Let us drink to the warriors whove gone.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, theres none who was bolder,

And manys the foebeast we slayed;

Well remember our friends who will never grow older,

Alas, what a price that they paid.

For the word has been spoken, the sword now is broken,

When were old we will sit and tell tales of their days.

35

Swartt Sixclaw sat roasting a mackerel by a fire, far down on the tideline, close to the rocks. More than one-third of his great horde had been lost that day, but victory had been nearly within his grasp. The groups of hordebeasts crouched around their fires were too weary to do anything but eat, sleep, or lick their wounds. Swartt stared up at the rock, racking his brain for a solution. Within the next hour it presented itself in the form of a weasel whom Nightshade brought to him.

Swartt found that he had to keep his eyes trained on the skinny, undersized creature. It was mottled, whether naturally or by skillful dyes, he could not tell, but it was only by watching its pale eyes that the Warlord could tell where it stood. The weasel had only to stand motionless against rock or sand and it almost vanished. It was sand-coloredor was it rock-hued?with gray, dirty-white and dark brown flecks, the strangest-looking creature he had ever witnessed.

Swartt looked at the vixen. “Whered you find that thing? he snarled.

“Lord, he is called the Wraith. He is not of our horde; I do not know where he comes from, though you would be wise to listen to his offer.

Swartt looked back and found he had lost sight of the Wraith. “Stan still, weasel. Where are you?

He tried not to start with shock as the voice came from behind the back of his neck.

“Me herrrre, Sirrrre!

The Wraith flitted round in front of him and sat by the fire. He spoke in a most peculiar manner, extending his Rs. Swartt kept his gaze fixed on the Wraiths eyes, the rest of his body kept disappearing and reappearing in the flicker of the firelight.

“Sit still an tell me why you came here, said Swartt.

The speckled mouth opened, revealing two rows of toothless gums. “Wrrrraith hearrrr you have enemy, me kill him forrrr you.

Suddenly Swartt was interested. The idea of an assassin had not occurred to him before. He would have liked to take Sun-flash alive,

but in the end, one way of winning victory was as good as another. The Warlord pointed his mailed paw at the pale watery eyes. “An what dyou get out of it, eh?

The soft rolling voice replied, “Me think you know that. Half, Sirrrrre!

Swartt knew what he meanthe had dealt with rogues and villains all his life. Half meant half of everything he stood to gain, but really it meant all: assassins who offered their services were always overambitious. Swartt shrugged. “Half seems fair enough. See yon mountain, theres a badger inside o there they call Sunflash the Mace. Bring me back the great mace that never leaves his side, an you get yer half!

The Wraith vanished. Swartt looked around and saw the creature sitting behind him, holding something in its claws, hissing, “Just strrroke badgerrr with me Kisserrrr!

It was a tiny knife, carved from some strange type of mottled stone, almost the same color as its owner.

Swartt curled his lip at the undersized weasel with his minute blade, “Yer goin tkill a Badger Lord wid that toy?

The pale eyes narrowed in a mocking smile. “See that rrrat yon, sitting by his firrrre? Watch!

The rat was wearing a bright red bandanna, so he was hard to miss. Swartt watched him sitting by the fire with some others. He had lost sight of the Wraith, so he kept watching me rat. Then the Wraiths voice came from beside him; the thin weasel was sitting, warming himself by the flames.

“One strnroke from me Kisserrrr, that one is slain.

The Warlord continued to watch the rat, his voice laden with sarcasm as he spoke. “Huh, he dont look so dead tme, chewin on a mackerel there as if there werent no tomorrer.

“Rrrright, Sirrrre, no tomorrrrow forrrr him!

Without warning the rat leapt up and, clapping a paw to the side of his neck, he staggered about, gurgling for a moment, then fell to the sand as if poleaxed. Swartt stared in astonishment, listening to the others from the company as they left the fireside to crowd around their companion.

“Wots wrong wid ole Glimpy?

“Hahaha! Cant yer see hes takin a nap, mate!

“Mebbe its somethine ate?

“Come on, Glimp ole mate, gerrup!

A stoat knelt at Glimpys side and inspected him. Suddenly he cried, “Glimpys dead, mates. Aint that awful, sittin scof-fin fish one moment, nex thing Vs pegged it!

A fox spat mackerel into the fire and rubbed his mouth. “Phtooh! I aint eatin no more o this fish, mates!

The Wraith had shifted position. He smiled at Swartt from across the fire. “Now Sirrre believe me, just one strrroke, not even a rrrreal cut. Me Kisserrrr neverrrr fail!

The Warlord nodded his head in admiration of the deed. “The Wraith, eh? Well, the jobs yers, Wraith. When do I expec to see you again?

“You dont see me if Wrrrraith not want you to. I will find you when it is done!

Then the Wraith vanished, melting into the night.

Swartt threw the vixen a roasted mackerel. “Good work, at last yve done somethin right. Stripeead is as good as dead, Id say. Oh, when the Wraith gets back, you know what tdo.

“Aye, Lord. I know exactly what to do! Nightshade replied.

36

It was the evening of the day Veil had robbed the dormice of their food and possessions, and the young ferret was not finding the going too easy. He chose a thick copse of pines for his camp. He brushed away the pine needles and dug a shallow hole, then he put steel to flint and made a small fire. Squatting by the flames, he ate some bread and cheese while roasting an apple. He was dozing, half asleep, wanned by the blazing pinecones and dead twigs, when two foxes arrived. At first Veil chose to ignore them. Though he was a bit startled and unsure of himself, he put on a tough face, making sure his knife and staff were clearly in evidence. Equally, both foxes feigned indifference to him. They squatted on the other side of the fire wordlessly. They were old and ragged, but sly looking. One carried a spear, the other a sling and pouch of stones. Drawing their tattered cloaks about them, they sat silent, casting the odd cunning glance toward the lone ferret.

Veil began to feel more uneasy, and he tried striking up a conversation with his uninvited visitors. “Where did you come from, friends? he asked.

The taller of the pair spat into the flames, narrowly missing Veils roasting apple.

“Nosy young snip, aint e, Brool?

The other smiled nastily, his eyes never leaving Veil. “Aye, stoopid too. We saw is fire from a good way off. Look, Vs got breadncheesenapples, a richbeast, eh, Renn!

Veil decided he could let the situation go no further. Holding his stave ready and brandishing the knife, he stood up and shouted, “Keep yer mangy paws off my vittles, Im not scared of you two ol ragbags!

The foxes worked their way around the fire until they were on either side of him. The one called Brool bared his few blackened tooth stumps. “Young uns these days aint got no respect, eh, Renn. Mangy ol ragbags? We got a cheeky one ere, no mistake!

The one called Renn neatly stabbed the roasting apple with his spear tip and, pulling it from the fire, he blew on it and took a bite. “Mmm, e cooks a decent apple though....

Veil grabbed at the spear, his voice shrill with anger. “You leave my apple alone, you dirty old ... Unnhh!

The young ferret had made the mistake of turning his back on Brool. The foxs sling, loaded with a heavy pebble, cracked down on Veils head from behind, laying him flat.

He came to his senses slowly, groaning at the triphammer throb in his skull. Both his paws were hoisted high, tied to an overhanging pine bough.

The two foxes were eating Veils food, cramming bread and cheese ravenously into their mouths. Brool took a drink from the flask; making a face he spat it out. “Yerk, water! Aint you got no good wine or ale, young un? Cold water dont sit easy on my stummick these seasons.

Renn sorted roughly through the traveling bag Veil had stolen from Ole Hoffy. “Nothin much in ere, Brool, jus a thin blanket an a few more apples. Not very considerate of yer, ferret!

Struggling against the tight bonds, Veil glared hatred at them. “Blunderin ol fools, dont you know who I am? Im Veil Sixclaw, son of Swartt the Warlord!

Renn tore a strip from the blanket and did a low servile bow. “Oh, fergive us, yer ighness! Yaaahahahah!

Then he gagged the young ferret firmly, boxing his ears and pulling his nose painfully. “Son of a Warlord, ydont say! Im the cousin of an eagle an a great fish meself. Wot about you, Brool?

“Who, me? Oh, Im the Queen o the flowery dell, pleased tmeet yer majesty, Im sure!

Both foxes fell about cackling. Forced to stand on tippaw, bound and gagged, Veil could only glare at them and make whining sobs of rage.

An even shade of gray washed the dawn sky, bringing dun-hued clouds and a steady downpour of rain. Bryony and Togget gathered up their belongings hurriedly from their camp on the open hills. The mole did not like rain.

Yurr, usns be soaken an cold ifn ee doant foind shelter, missie, ony fishes do loik ee rain!

The mousemaid pointed to the distant pine grove, saying, “Come on then, lets make for there; we can camp in the trees until the rain stops.

Togget took off, both paws over his head, calling back to Bryony, “Hoo aye, maken ee foire an git brekkfist a goin, oim gurtly ungered furr ee vittles!

The mousemaid ran after her companion, laughing. “Slow down, you great Dibbun, the rain wont melt you!

“Hurr, so ee says, missie, tho oi baint too sure!

It was dim and dry in the half light of the close-growing pines. They shook themselves off and began opening their pack. Bryony stopped, sniffing the air.

“Smoke, I can smell burning, she said.

Toggets smal! button nose twitched. “Youm roight, Bro-inee, sumbeast got flames burnen sumwheres.

The mousemaid fastened the haversack and shouldered it. “It may be Veil, but then again, it may not be. Go quietly, Togget, make no noise. Lets see who the fire belongs to.

Following the aromatic smell of burning pinecones, the two friends stole silently through the grove.

Bryony was first to spot the glow of flames between the trees. Taking care not to crack twigs underpaw, they stole forward, then, bellying down in the springy carpet of pine needles, they peered over a fallen trunk at the scene in a hollow below.

Brool and Renn were breakfasting off what was left of the bread and hurling apple cores at the bound figure dangling from a pine bough.

Bryony seized Toggets paw. “Look, its Veil! Those two foxes must have captured him!

“Hurr, but theym looken loik narstybeasts, wot can usns be a doin to elp maister Veil?

Bryony studied the situation below before answering. “Hmm, theyre armed, we couldnt risk an open fight. But I think I might have an idea that will work. Heres what we do!

Renn the fox threw some twigs on the fire and sprawled on the

ground, eyeing Veil. “Dyou suppose this Swartt Warlord would pay a bit o ransom to ave his darlin son back in one piece, mate?

Brool looked at his companion pityingly. “You gone squishy in uY brains, Renn, the only thing a Warlord would give you for takinis kin prisoner would be yore own ead on a plate ... Yowp!

A hard, green pinecone struck the fox on his nose, followed a moment later by another, which bounced off his partners jaw.

Renn grabbed his spear, snarling, “Whos slingin cones? Owch! Another solid green cone hit him in the eye.

Brool was about to take his sling out when a green cone stung his paw. “Owowow! Hoi! Stop chuckin those tilings willy ... Agh! He fell back, clutching his mouth as he spat a broken tooth out.

Cones began whizzing in, thick and fast and accurate. The two foxes were battered and bewildered; the missiles seemed to be coming from everywhere. Renn could hardly see, having been struck in both eyes. Brool had been belted over the head five times in quick succession by cones, and was feeling very sore and dazed. They huddled together, crouching to escape the stinging rain of hard green cones, but the cones kept hur-ding in, thwacking them hard as ever, bouncing off their skinny backs and bottoms until Brool howled out, “Stoppit! Stoppit! Were goin!

Thwack! Ping! Thud! Clack! The green cones continued. The two foxes could bear it no more. “Yaaaah! Lets get outta ... Yeeek! Ooh! Yowp! They fled through the woods, away to where it was open ground, regardless of rain, limping and hopping in pain.

Togget rolled down into the hollow and sat with his paws hanging limply by his sides.

“Wourr, moi ole pawsll drop off ifn oi flings jus one more of they poiney cones, wourr!

Bryony stretched painfully to reach the ropes binding Veils paws to the bough. “Veil. Poor Veil, she cried.

The moment Veils paws were free he tore away the gag from his mouth and yelled angrily at the mousemaid, “What in the name of bloodnfur are you followin me for? Ignoring the hurt in Bryonys eyes, he continued. “Still spyin on me, eh! Why dont you jus leave me alone?

Bryony was dismayed and puzzled at Veils attitude. “But ... but... we saved you from those vermin! They might have ended up killing you, Veil!

The young ferret stormed about the hollow, rubbing life back into his paws, which were still numb from being bound. “Well, I didnt need savin, see! I was ready to slip those ropes and grab the spear. I can look after meself without you an that stupid mole runnin around tryin to nursemaid me.

Togget shook a heavy digging paw at him. “Youm watch ee tongue, maister, youm a gurtly ungrateful furret. Missie Broinee never did ought but good to ee!

Veil slumped beside the fire. “Well, where was she when they chucked me out of Redwall, eh? he sneered. “Ill tell you, sidin with all her goody-goody friends, thats where she was. Outcast they called me; nobeast raised a paw to elp me then.

Bryony placed a paw gently on his shoulder. “Oh, Veil, youre so wrong. Ive always been your friend, I care for you more than any creature living!

He shook her paw off and leapt up, grabbing his staff and belongings. “Get away from me, both of you! Goon, get back to your precious Abbey and spend your nights talkin about me an what a bad lot I was. Aye, Veil the vermin Outcast!

Togget ran between Veil and Bryony and shoved the young ferret backward, away from the mousemaid. “Hair, youm nought by a villyun, wi all yore bad talk! he shouted.

Veil rushed forward. “Out of my way! he snarled, pushing Togget roughly to the ground. The mole fell, hitting his head on a jutting rock.

Immediately Bryony was pummeling Veil with both paws. “You stupid beast! Me and Togget are the only friends you have in this world! Dont you see?

But in his rush to escape, Veil hurtled on, knocking her flat. Crawling on all fours, Bryony dragged herself to the stricken moles side. “Togget, are you hurt? If youve harmed this good creature... But she was talking to thin air. Veil had grabbed their remaining haversack of supplies and dashed off into the pines.

Bryony sat by the fire, cradling her molefriends head in her paws and weeping. Toggets eyelids flickered, then weakly he raised a digging claw and brushed a teardrop from her nosetip. “Oi thort et were a rainen again, hurr moi ole ead do be urted gurtly.

The mousemaid wiped away her tears and hugged him. ,; “Oh, Togget, thank goodness that youre alive! ; “Hurr, tis a wunner oi am, missie, layin yurr wi a lump v loik a mounting on moi ead, an ee crushen moi ribs tbits!

Out on the hills, the rain had stopped. It was a breezy midday when Veil sighted the two old foxes up ahead. At the point where hills met flatlands, a river, swollen by the rain, ran its winding course out onto the plain. The foxes were camped at its edge, using wet grass poultices to bathe the injuries from the sharp green pinecones. They did not see Veil until it was too late. Swinging his stave down hard with both paws, he hit Brool a vicious blow to the base of his skull. Then, grabbing a spear sticking into the ground next to Brool, he drove it into Renn. Rolling both foxes into the river, he watched them being borne away on the flow.

“When you get to Dark Forest tell them Veil the Outcastsent you!

The river was flowing in a westerly direction. Veil followed its banks until he found what he was looking for, an old willow trunk, washed up there after winter. Levering it into the water with the spear butt, he waded in and boarded it. Straddling the trunk, the young ferret made a meal of scones and crystallized fruit from the haversack as he was borne westward. Far in the distance he could see mountains.

37

Bryony would not let Togget travel until midafternoon. When they quit the pine grove she made a compress of rain-wet dock leaves and bound it to his forehead. Hungry and dispirited, they pressed onward. Bryony had to put up with listening to a relentless menu of Toggets favorite foods; she let him ramble on, knowing he was trying to forget the ache in his head. He trudged by her side, arranging meals.

“Oi loiks damsen pudden wi lots o meadowcrearn on et, an oi favors noo-baked bread, hurr, wi ole yellow cheese an a gurt summer salad. Ho, but deepernever turnipnta-ternbeetroot pie, hoo urr! Oid swap moi tail furr one roight naow, wi gudd mushyroom gravy poured thick atop of et!

The visions conjured up by Toggets descriptions soon had Bryony comparing her favorite dishes with him. “Id like a beaker of strawberry cordial and a big pastie, a mushroom, potato, and onion one; after that I think Id go for some hot apple-and-blackberry crumble, with sweet white arrowroot sauce poured all over it. Then Id have a wedge of white cheese, the one with almonds and hazelnuts in it, and one, no two, of Friar Bunfolds fresh oatfarls, straight from the oven. Yummy!

Togget held one paw to his forehead and the other to his stomach. “Aow, missie, do be soilent, oim tumble angry! “Well, you started it, moleyface! Look, theres a river! They made camp on the riverbank, and Bryony redampened Toggets poultice with river water. Nowhere was anything edible to be found. The country ahead of them sloped slightly downward, running off to a flat plain, grassy and deserted. Behind a small hillock they snuggled down on the lee side; away from the breeze, it was quite sunny and warm. Togget was snoring gently and Bryonys eyes were beginning to droop when she heard a deep bass voice singing:

“One day in spring I said to me wife,

Though were close together as forknknife,

An Ive loved ydearly all of me life,

Still Ill have to follow the wateeeeeeer!

She yelled at me an took up her broom,

An chased me twice around the front room,

Shoutin, That ole riverll be yore doom,

Think of yer son an yer daughteeeeeeeer!

So I said to her, O love dearie me,

I must follow the river right down tthe sea,

Tis the only way a beast can be free,

An I ran cos I couldnt have fought heeeeeeer!

She said tme, Now listen, you,

Me an the young uns are all comin too,

On board of a raft you need a good crew,

Itll make the journey seem shorteeeeeeeer! “

A large untidy raft hove into view round the bend, smoke curling from the chimney of a hut built at its center. A fat, jolly-looking hedgehog was leaning on the tiller; over his head, a line was strung between two poles set forard and aft, with gaily colored washing fluttering from it.

Bryony ran into the shallows, waving her paws. “Hello there, I mean, ahoy! Could you take two passengers?

The fat hedgehog grinned from ear to ear, revealing a wonderful set of even white teeth. “Ahoy yoreself, mousey, gangway while I brings er inshore!

He steered the raft into the shallows, almost grounding it, and asked, “Two, ysay, wheres tother one, missie?

“Yurr, SUIT, tho oim nought but a pore damaged mole-beast! Togget came ambling around the hillock, holding his head.

A small wiry female hedgehog came bustling out of the hut OB the raft, her skirt billowing over a welter of petticoats. “Corks n crivvens! she exclaimed. “Wot appened to yore nut, mole? Did yer fall on it?

Togget tenderly rubbed the poultice on his forehead. “Oid tell ee, maim, but oim far too ungered furr gossip.

Immediately the hogwife gave her husband a mighty shove. “Ducksndrakes! Dont stan there lookin ornamental, Dud-die Pollspike, git the pore mole an the mousemaid aboard an1 lets feed “em!

Duddle tugged his headspikes respectfully. “Wotever you say, Tutty, my liddle bankblossom!

The cabin hut was very chintzy, with brightly coloured tablecloth and curtains, thick, bright-dyed rush mats, and a large square stove on which various dishes bubbled and stewed. Bryony and Togget were seated at a semicircular window table and given beetroot-and-raspberry wine in small mugs to revive them. Tutty Pollspike busied herself at the stove, while her husband, Duddle, shooed their two young hoglets, Clematis Rosetea and Arundo, out of the way.

“Landing party, my darling ducklings, play ashore awhile until yore dear mama an my goodself get the vittles ready.

Bryony and Togget introduced themselves and told their story while Duddle and Tutty prepared the meal, Duddle tasted soup on a spoon tip, smacked his lips several times, and muttered, “Needs more fennel, splendid herb, always like it. Well, let me tell you, young uns, yore ferret has probly taken the river route if he has a grain of sense, its the only way ttravel. Easy on the paws, never goes uphill, an ycan take the home too.

Tutty placed fresh bread on the table, smacking Toggets paw away. “Crabsnclawlegs! Yore worsen my Duddle. You can travel with us for as long as you pleases, mayap youll find yore ferret. But ifn you touches any vittles afore the table is set, Ill chop off yore tails afore you can blink. Got that?

She fixed Togget with a warning stare as he nodded and said, “Got et, thankee, marm, youm be a cutten off ee tailers if usns be a touchen-afore vittles be ready. Ho urr!

The two hoglets were called in from play when the meal was ready. Duddle poled the raft from the bank and it drifted downriver, with the tiller lashed in position while they ate.

There was thick watercress-and-turnip soup; warm, brown wheat bread; a deep dish of cheese, mushroom, and leek bake; and a blackberry jam roly poly pudding with meadowcream. Afterward they sipped borage-and-rosehip tea. Duddle went out on deck to tend the tiller, while the friends were entertained by young Clematis Roselea, who recited a poem taught by her mama.

“I have learnt to wash my paws, An say sir an marm,

An dont act daft when on this raft,

Lest I do come to harm.

To sit up straight at table time,

An go to bed when told,

Mama says Im a precious hog,

In fact Im good as gold ... So there!

Young Arundo was about to flick an appleseed at her, when be caught his mamas stem eye, and he shrugged philosophically instead. “Thorry! I dont want my tail cut off with a thingle thwipe!

“Ahoy in the hut, molenmaid, all paws on deck an see this!

At the sound of Duddles voice from outside, Bryony and

Togget left the table and went to see what he had found. Tutty set her stern gaze on the hoglets, who had half risen from table. “Rhubarbnrosebuds! Did anybeast tell you two to move?

Arundo settled back glumly, making a chopping motion with his paw. “Thame old thtory, chop off our tailth!

The bodies of the two old foxes were caught up in the s branches of a half-submerged bush in a shallow cove beyond a curve.

Duddle pointed them out to the friends. “Dreadful end for anybeast, even two villains like them. How dyou figger it happened?

Togget nodded knowingly. “Oill bet an acorn to an apple twere maister Veil did et!

Bryony wagged a reproving paw at the mole. “Oh, Togget, bow could you say that? Veil wouldnt have killed them. Perhaps it was just some kind of nasty accident!

Togget turned away and trundled back to the hut, muttering, “Aye, an praps twill snow this evenin, et bein midsummer!

Sometime during the next night, when Veil lay sleeping on the willow trunk, a slipstream came up and flowed off on a slight slope. Not

being awake to control the log. Veil slept on, unaware that the current had steered his craft off the main river. The willow trunk drifted silently into the slipstream, bearing the sleeping ferret away toward the distant mountains and fast-running rapids that led to a waterfall.

The same wet dawn that had sent Bryony and Togget scurrying for the pine copse broke over Salamandastron. Rain sheeted out in curtains over the still, waveless sea; hordebeasts huddled miserably among the rocky outcrops on the tideline, protecting smoky fires from guttering in the downpour. Swartt crouched with several of his Captains and Nightshade, their fire sheltered by an old tent canvas pegged to the side of the fock groyne. Those around the Warlord remained silent, not knowing which mood chose to possess their leader on such a cheerless day. Neither the ferret nor his vixen had spoken to anybeast of their latest plan.

Both watched the mountain, its top shrouded in mist. Though Swartt and his seer did not speak, both their minds were concentrated on the same thing. Was the Wraith inside the caves and passages of Salamandastron, stalking their Sunflash with his lethal stone blade?

38?

Wraith lay panting on a narrow ledge, halfway up to the window of the Badger Lords bedchamber. Though the weasel could move speedily over short distances, he had never been a strong creature. Granted, he was endowed with a natural cunning and the fantastic power of camouflage, but there his powers ended. He lacked strength and stamina. Wiping rainwater from his pale eyes, he glanced upward. Sounds of breakfast bustle and banter reached his soaking ears. Checking that his deadly stone knife was dry and safe in its sheath, Wraith hauled himself wearily up the rain-slicked mountainside as the downpour continued its relentless course.

Folrig and Ruddle were merciless jokers, and wherever the opportunity presented itself for a bit of fun, the two otters were certain to be involved. Unwittingly, the fat, food-loving hare Forty had presented himself as an easy target. Sunflash had pointed him out at breakfast.

Folrig and Ruddle came bounding into the dining hall, hungry from dawn sentry duty. Roughly they elbowed their way in beside the Badger Lord and began helping themselves to his hot oatcakes.

“Move over, ole frightface, make way for two starvin riv-erdogs! Were fightin fit an ready to eat anybeast to a standstill!

The big badger pushed hot blackberry pie and mint tea in their direction, commenting dryly as they ate ravenously, “You two uglymugs are mere babes when it comes to victualing. See that fat young hare over there, Forty? Now theres a bucko Id call a good scofferwhy, hed eat you two out of house and home while he was waiting to be served. Watch him!

Both otters did, their own food forgotten as they observed Forty with fascination. In rapid order a full apple pie, a plate of dried fruits, a big pitcher of strawberry fizz, and an enormous carrot and mushroom pastie were devoured by the insatiable hare. Mopping up the gravy from the pastie with half a crusty loaf, Forty eyed his neighbors plate covetously. “Mmmf grmmmf snch! Er, I say, old lad, if ycant tackle that measly bowl of pear crumble, then chuck it along this way, wot?

Ruddle shook his head in admiration. “Wot a beast! Cmon, mate, weve got to meet that furry feedbag!

After breakfast Sunflash went up to the bedchamber window, where he stood with Sabretache and Colonel Sandgall. They viewed the rain-swept beach and the saturated hordes gathered round their sputtering fires amid the rocks. Polishing his monocle, the Colonel twitched an ear to the sky.

“Good ol rain, wot! Nothin like it for dampen! n vermin spirits, give em a chance to reconsider their bally position. Wetnworried, Id say, by the look of the blighters!

Sabretache clapped paw to the hilt of his fighting blade. “Mayhap, sah, but what about when the jolly old precipitation Ceases, what then?

The Colonel stared at him blankly. “Precipitation ceases? Explain yself, laddie buck!

Sabretache gave Sunflash a quick wink. “Beggin ypardon, sah, I mean, what happens when the rain stops?

The Badger Lord answered before Sandgall had a chance to. “We attack! Leave the bare minimum of defenders at the mountain here, the rest of us put on full battle gear and take the fight to the enemy. This is the best chance well have: our numbers are bolstered by shrews, otters, and squirrels.

Squinching the monocle into his cheek, Sandgall agreed. “Excellent plan, mLord, was just about to suggest it mself!

The Wraith was directly below the broad window ledge. He lay breathless in the rain, listening to what was going on. A quick peek reassured him that Sunflash was standing close to the window space. The weasel planned to make his move as soon as he regained his wind and felt fit enough for a burst of speed. Drawing the poisoned stone blade, he sheltered it carefully against the rain with his paw. All it would take was a quick leap onto the window sill and a swift strike at the unsuspecting badger.

Chuckling and chortling, Folrig and Ruddle came bounding into the bedchamber. They dashed about, searching frantically in the nooks and corners.

Sunflash could not help smiling at the two funsters. “Excuse me, you two frog-frighteners, but what are you doing chasing round my

bedchamber, eh?

Between gusts of laughter they explained.

“Yahahaha! You shoulda seen ole Fortys face!

“Whoohooheehee! We pulled the ole rockcream trick on im!

“Haha! Aye, we told im that otter rockcreams were the most delicious thing anybeast ad ever tasted. So, that greedy Forty, couldnt wait to get is paws on some!

“Right! Then we nips out tthe kitchens an covers a few rocks wid meadowcream. Otter rockcreams, see?

Sunflash stifled a chuckle. “He didnt eat any, surely?

Folrig and Ruddle leaned on each other for support, helpless with mirth. “He, he, heeheehee! Pore old Forty ad bolted one down afore we could stop im, shoulda seen is face, hahahahaha!

Colonel Sandgall twitched his eye, making the monocle wiggle. “Hmm, very droll, Im sure, but if I were you chaps Id scoot fast or hide. I can hear young Forty comin, an he dont sound greatly pleased or amused by your jape!

“Gloggle! Yarggh! Ill rockcream the bounders! Where are the flippin plank-tailed villains, Ill skin em alive!

Folrig and Ruddle shot around Sunflash, attempting to hide themselves behind the badgers broad back. Forty came thundering in, cream all around his mouth and an otter rockcream f cake in each paw, his face a picture of comic indignation. “Come out, you rotten otters! he yelled. A loud giggle from behind Sunflash gave them both away..The outraged hare saw that the Badger Lord suddenly ap-I peared to have six footpaws. Forty raised the rockcreams to ; throw. Sunfiash saw what was about to happen and dropped flat to the chamber floor, leaving Folrig and Ruddle exposedto Fortys vengeance.

It was not a lucky day for the Wraith. The mottled weasel sprang upright in the windowspace, wielding his deadly stone knife, triumph shining in his pale eyes. At that exact moment, Forty flung the cream-covered rocks and the otters ducked with lightning speed.

Splakk!

Both missiles scored a direct hit on the Wraiths face. Instinctively, the weasels paws flew up to his mouth, and he plunged silently backward into space, the dagger sticking in his jaw. The last sound the Wraith made was when his felling body thudded against the rocks far below. Draped across the rain-soaked stone with both eyes closed, the carcass of what had once been the weasel Wraith was almost invisible.

Sabretache fixed Forty and the two otters with the haughty glare of an outraged officer. “Im goin to count to three now, and if you chaps havent found someplace else to play your silly tricks by then, youll all be on a fizzer, double guard duty for three nights. Understood?

Three hasty salutes, a patter of footpaws, and the slamming of the door announced tranquillity had returned to the bedchamber.

Colonel Sandgall polished furiously at his monocle. “Must be somethin wrong with this bally contrivance, wot! Dyou know, I thought I saw some type of vermin standin on that windowledge, not a moment ago, confounded strange, eh, wot?

Sunflash coughed politely, catching a nod from Sabretache. “Did you really, Colonel? Im sure I saw something there, too; mustve been a trick of the light, reflection off the sea or something. What dyou think,Tache?

The hare leaned out over the windowsill. “Oh, indeed, sah, stranger things have been seen around this mountain more times than enough, wot! I say, the jolly old rains startin to pack in, see, theres the sun comin out!

Steam rose in wisps from the sand as the midday sun rose high to warm the earth. Swartt Sixclaw stood rapping his gauntleted paw against his sword hilt.

“We shouldve heard somethin by now. Surely if this Wraith beast is as good as Vs supposed ter be, the badger must be dead?

Nightshade moved artfully out of paw range. “Well just have to wait and see, Lord.

Swartt turned on her, snarling as his temper rose. “Let me ear you say that jus once more, vixen, an youll be wearin yer tail round yer neck fer a scarf!

He transferred his attention to the hordebeasts, who were leaping

about in the shallows, trying to catch mackerel from a shoal that had ventured in too close. “Huh, will yer lookit that slab-sided lot o bumpkins, they make better fishers than fighters. See that the best of their catch is sent up to my fire. Where in the name o tripesntendons as that Wraith got to?

Silently the warriors of Salamandastron stood ready as the rough-timber gate at the main entrance creaked open. Sunflash the Mace led them out, clad only in his chain mail tunic and carrying the mace loosely at his side. Lady Firdance, the squirrel leader, took the left flank with Folrig and Ruddle. Log a Log took the right flank with Fleetrunn and Hedgepaw. Sabretache and Rockleg took the center slightly behind Sunflash. Javelins, bows, spears, slings, and rapiers were clutched tight in every paw as they skirted the deserted trench in front of the mountain. Quietly, grimly, they strode, squirrels, otters, hares, and shrews, hard-eyed, tight-jawed, their paws making no sound in the sand.

Swartt had turned away; he sat with his back against the rocks, eyes half closed, enjoying the warmth and gentle breezes after the mornings rain. A stoat was emerging from die shallows, a flapping silver-banded mackerel impaled on his spear-point. Suddenly, he glanced up the beach and froze. Fish and spear were forgotten as he stood pointing and yelling, “Look, theyre comin!

Swartt sprang upright, yanking out his sword. “Captains to me! Get out of that water! Everybeast stan to arms! Battle stations, the lot o yur!

Bradberry was marching alongside Forty. He heard the shouts lower down the beach and saw hordebeasts from afar, dashing hither and thither, and said, “Well, theyve seen us now, Potty old lad.

Keeping his eyes front, Sabretache gave orders calmly. “Dont run, me beauties, not yet. Shoulder tshoulder, thats the stuff, keep those weapons down, dont want tstab the chap in front of you. Ready, mLord?

Sunflashs deep grunt was heard throughout the ranks. “Ready! Follow me!

The horde massed on the tideline, spears bristling, drums banging, conch shells blowing, banners fluttering out on the noon breeze. Swartt moved to the rear and, climbing up on a rocky outcrop, he spoke down to the vixen. “Well, we lost some yesterday, but now I can

see what their strength is. Hah! We still outnumber em three to one. I see the badger still lives, so I can stick tthe oath I swore. Itll be me, Swartt Sixclaw, who slays im, an no otherbeast!

Forty grasped Bradberrys paw firmly. “Here we go, Bradders. Good luck, old chap, give em what for!

Sunflash half raised his mace. “March at the double now! he ordered.

The pace speeded up, Sabretache and other officers calling, “Keep those lines straight, weapons down. Wait for it!

Sunflash raised the mace higher and shouted, “Forward at the half run now!

The paws of the advancing warriors broke into a fast lope.

“Archers ready at flanks and rear. Fire!

A broad half moon crescent of shafts cut into the blue afternoon air, whirring angrily over the advance at the front ranks of the waiting vermin.

Sunflash swung his mace high.

“Chaaaaaaarge!

Breaking into a headlong run, the warriors from the mountain brought their weapons up. Spears and javelintips glinted, swords and rapiers flashed. Amid the thunder of paws, wild war cries and battle shouts rent die summer air.

“Eeulaliaaaaa! Logalogalogalogaloooooog! Firjak Greenstone! Whump! Whump! Whump! Bloodnvinegaaaaar!

The hordebeasts banged their shields and yelled back.

“Swartt! Swartt! Sixclaaaaaw! Kill! Kiiiiiillll!

Like a tidal wave against a rocky shore, Sunflashs command crashed into the horderanks, the shock of the impact driving the vermin back ten full pawlengths. Like a madbeast the Badger Lord plunged deep into the enemy lines, his mace whirling as he fought toward the distant figure of Swartt perched on the rock at the rear. Sabretache led his troops in to protect the badgers back. Already limping from a spear wound, the saber master dealt death to any who came within range of his curving blade. Arrows and sling stones from the rear of

both forces zinged overhead like maddened wasps.

The might of the horde, having taken the initial shock of the charge, now began pressing forward, and many a good warrior fell to vermin spears and cutlasses. Lady Firdance was having more success than most; forming a fighting triangle with Folrig and Ruddle, she hit hard at the hordes right flank, driving deep in an effort to meet up with Sunflash, whose huge form could be seen like a landmark as he ploughed forward. Bradberry went down with an arrow in his shoulder, and Forty stumbled and tripped, falling upon his friend. He turned to rise as a searat swept a large scimitar at him; the rat gave a shriek and fell dead at his side. Folrig pulled his javelin free as Ruddle assisted both hares up, winking at Forty.

“Up yget, matey, mustve been the weight of that rock-cream pulled you down. Get Bradders beind our archers, see you later, good huntin, eh. Whump-whumpwhump! Firjak Greenstone!

The vermin on the opposite flank charged the shrews glee-folly. Attacking small creatures with small swords was better than facing hares. They did not reckon on an old shrew maeuver known as the Guosim Windmill. Three tight circles of shrews in one, whirling madly, some cutting low, others at stomach height, while more worked at head and neck level, the vicious little rapiers went in and out, round and round, scything at everything in their path, while a row of Guosim shrews at the center of the ring continuously slung rocks over their comrades heads.

Swartt stood tip-pawed upon his rock, shouting, “Were pushinem back, vixen, I told yer, weve got the numbers on our side!

Nightshade climbed up to appraise the situation. “Aye, but only in the center, Lord, and thats because the badger made his move too early and allowed them to close in around him. See the flanks, the horde is crumbling and giving way on both sides. We may have the numbers, but theyve got the heart!

Swartt sent her flying with a kick. “When I want yore opinion Ill ask fer it. Get me that bow an1 arrers, the badger11 soon be in range!

Sunflash was like a great seabeast surrounded by waves of foebeasts, but all he could see through the red mists of blood-wrath was the ferret, perched on the rock down by the tideline. His great speed with the heavy mace was causing destruction among the horde. Up and down, left and right, swinging in a huge blur the mighty war club

battered horde vermin, sword, spear, and dagger without regard to any. Snapped blades, shattered hilts, and splintered hafts flew high in the air around him. Sabretache wisely kept his force behind the berserk Badger Lord. Rockleg fought alongside Hedgepaw. Both would take a short run, vault high on their spear shafts, and come down with long hind legs kicking savagely into the faces of the vermin.

The hordebeasts fought fiercely, with the strength of desperation. Most were experienced warbeasts, determined to push through their attackers and gain the mountain, where there would be shelter, food, and plunder. But Nightshades judgment had been correct: the mountain warriors all had brave hearts. The tide of the battle began to turn when the Guosim shrews broke through to the center and joined up with the hares and Lady Firdances squirrels, who had been holding the middle with the otters. Now the flanks of the horde had been well battered, and the attackers massed in the centre. Leaving any vermin who had broken past them to be dealt with by the rear lines of archers, the entire force turned to fight their way through to Sunflash, raising one mighty cry. “Eeulaliaaaaaa!

Swartt cursed as his arrow took a searat in the back of the skull instead of striking Sunflash. He notched another shaft to his bowstring and fired. This time he did not miss: the arrow pierced the Badger Lord high on his shoulder, where the chain-mail tunic ended. Still swinging the mace, Sunflash gave a deep roar and tore the arrow out with his teeth. Spitting the shaft away, he waved the battle club in Swartts direction, his voice thundering out over the melee.

“Im coming, Sixclaw, wait there!

Then the horde broke and began retreating, battered and defeated by the relentless mountain warriors. Sunflash was suddenly knocked down from behind as milling, panicked hordebeasts fled toward the sea. Sabretache stood with one foot-paw on the Badger Lords back, wielding his saber like a maddened drum major as he shouted orders.

“Up an at em! Forward to the sea! Chaaaaarge!

Hedgepaw and Rockleg were at his side in an instant. Between them they managed to drag the dazed Sunflash upright. Rubbing sand from his eyes, the badger bellowed furiously, “Wheres Swartt?

The rock stood empty. Swartt Sixclaw and his vixen had gone!

39

Evening crimsoned into purple; on the horizon, a blood-colored sun dipped slowly into the dark, tired sea. Spears with thick rush torches tied to them stood upright in the shore along the tideline. Sunflash the Mace sat with his head buried in both paws; his war weapon lay on the sand beside him. Colonel Sandgall had come down from the mountain; he threaded his way through the exhausted warriors, shaking paws, patting shoulders, and giving credit where it was due.

“Well fought! Good show! Stout feller! Brave gel, wot! Sabretache was cleaning off his blade in the sand. He stood smartly to attention, saluting the old Colonel.

Sandgall nodded. “Did any of em surrender? Prisoners? The hare Captains saber pointed to the sea. “None, sah, fraid not, it was a no-surrender situation. Most of em retreated too far an too fast, dragged out by the undercurrent. As for our own, we got off surprisin light, sah, though theyre still takin count on wounded an slain.

Sunflash joined them. The red light of bloodwrath had faded from his eyes, though they were still dark and troubled. “Six-claw wasnt lost in the sea, Im sure of it, hes too cunning for that. Swartt has escaped, and he cant have got very far. Its my job to go after him and finish what he started!

Sandgall gave his monocle a quick polish and looked the badger up and down from head to footpaws. “If I may make so bold as tsay, mLord, youre in no fit condition to go chasin off anywhere. Head wound, arrow hole in yleft shoulder, spear thrust to footpaw, deep slash across mace paw. How far dyou think youll get in that state, eh? Sundew, Ryeback, fetch your box of medical tricks an patch this beast up! . As the hares ministered to his wounds Sunflash protested, “Dont you see, I must go after Swartt. The more time I spend dawdling here, the farther away hes escaping!

But Colonel Sandgall would brook no argument, not even from the Badger Lord of Salamandastron.

“Tomorrow our Long Patrol will pick up the ferrets trail, then you can face the bounder an settle up your score. But if ;you try to go it alone tonight, sah, then Im afraid Ill use our warriors to stop you. It is my duty as Colonel and Senior Offisah at Salamandastron to protect my

Badger Lord, beggin ypardon an hopin you understand. Sah! ; Sunflash nodded. “I understand. Owthat hurts!

Sundew chided him as she rethreaded a fish-bone needle with a long hair plucked from the badgers own back. “Keep the ol head still then, Sire, hows a body supposed to stitch up this head wound if you keep nodding like a woodpecker at an oak?

When the hares had finished, Sunflash stood up stiffly. Stitched, poulticed, and cleaned, he strode off with a slight limp toward the mountain and his bedchamber.

“Tomorrow, then, Sandgall! Ill be up at the crack of dawn; have your Long Patrol waiting, ready to travel!

“If hes up at crack o dawn itll only be to sleepwalk, Ryeback whispered to her friend Sundew. “I gave him enough slumberin draught to knock three out!

With his vixen and about thirty other vermin, Swartt had waded off through the shallows in the thick of the retreat. Striking north and east, he crossed the shore on the mountains south side, up into the high hills behind Salamandastron. The ferret knew that making camp or sleeping was out of the question; he had to get far away from Sunflash the Mace. Breasting the first hill, he paused and watched those behind him struggling and panting as they strove to reach the top.

“Move yerselves if you want ter stay alive, yrotpawed, maggot-backed ditherers! Swartt berated them. “Step lively or sitnweep here til the badger an those hares track yer down!

Nightshade brought up the rear. The vixen seer was puzzled. Her dreams and visions all showed Sunflash falling at the battle in front of the mountain, and twice it had almost happened, but at the last moment her visions clouded and Sunflash was replaced by an ancient female badger. The vixen was baffled, because all of her dreams ended with Swartt standing on top of a mountain, laughing and victorious. Wearily she cast all omens aside, banishing dreams from her mind as she followed the leader she felt fated to serve.

Dawn had long dispelled the sea mists, and the sun was already beginning to climb in the sky when Skarlath landed on the windowsill of the badgers bedchamber. Cocking his head curiously on one side, the kestrels keen eye watched the Badger Lord sleeping. The mace still hung from its cord on Sunflashs paw, and his mighty chest rose and

fell to the echo of rumbling snores. Skarlath spread his wings wide and tilted his fierce curved beak upward.

“Kreeeeeh! Does my friend sleep his life away? Kreeeeh!

The big badger sat bolt upright, pawing at his eyes.

“Where, what? Ive been asleep ... Skarlath!

The kestrel swooped in, landing on Sunflashs shoulder. “So, my gold-striped friend, it must have been a good, hard days battle to keep you so long abed this morn....

The Badger Lord tore at the bandages and poultices restricting his limbs, flinging them from him. “Crack o dawn, eh? Well, where are they, the Long Patrol trackers? Swartt escaped. Ive got to go after him!

Skarlath flew back to the windowsill. “The hares are down there by the sea, burying their comrades who were slain in battle. I know that Sixclaw got away; I picked up his tracks south of here at dawn. His band numbers three and thirty. He is heading north, taking a wide easterly loop, traveling light with few rest stops.

Shunning the chain-mail tunic, Sunflash chose an old woven tabard, smiling grimly as he donned it. “So, it all comes full circle. That is about the number he had when we used to hunt one another in younger days. Come on, my hawk, let us go hunting again one last time, just the two of us!

The burial party had completed their sad task, and they arrived back at the dining hall within the mountain to take lunch. Sundew, who had immediately gone to check on her patient, came bounding downstairs, shouting, “Colonel Sandgall, sah, mLord Sunflash is gone!

Sandgall slammed a flagon of cordial down so hard that it cracked, and the liquid dribbled into his lap. “Furnbothera-tion! I thought you said hed sleep til noontide, marm! Sabretache, hows the old footpaw, ready to travel? Rockleg, Fleetrunn! Rationsnweapons for twelve Long Patrol. Pick up the tracks, follow His Lordship, quicks the word, sharps the action. Dismiss!

Within a remarkably short time, twelve hares of the Long Patrol, headed by Sabretache, had found the distinctive paw-prints of Sunflash and set off fast after him.

High in the hills, with the hawk on his shoulder and the mace in his

grasp, Sunflash followed the trail of Swartt Six-claw, the lifelong enemy whom he had sworn long seasons ago to slay.

40

Bryony and Togget lay flat on their backs at the stern end of the raft, a jug of cowslip cordial and a deep-dish pear-and-red-currant tart between them.

The mousemaid dipped her paw overboard, allowing cool river water to caress it. “Hey ho, Togget, this is the life for us, eh!

“Bo urr, et surpintly am, Broinee, oi never gurtly was one furr sailen, but this hes most wunnerful, burr aye, sot be.

The hoglet Arundo was hiding behind the hut, watching them. The sight of Toggets fat stomach sticking in the air was too much for him. Breaking cover, he dashed up and jumped on it. “Heehee! I jumped onna moleth thtomach!

Togget was too winded to express an opinion on the subject, and Bryony was shaking with laughter along with Arundo. Tutty Pollspike was pegging out washing up forard; she had seen what took place and shouted dire warnings. “Rushes

nriverbanks! Just let me catch either o you jumpin on that pore hanimals stummick agin an Ill chop yore tails off, dye hear me, you two?

Bryony sat up indignantly, pointing at Arundo. “But it wasnt me, it was him!

Arundo pointed back at her, still giggling. “Heeheehee! Mouthemaid tol me to do it!

Duddle emerged from the cabin, stretching after his mid-morning nap. “Now then, me bold beasties, he said, “whats all the kerfuffle out here? Still mindin the tiller for me, Tog-get?

Remembering the duty he had been allotted, Togget got up and, rubbing his stomach, leaned against the tiller. “Aye, zurr, ee tiller aint been gone nowheres since oi been mindin et.

Duddle took command of the tiller, saying, “Have to be careful on this stretch, theres a slipstream off to the south comin up shortly. Rapidsnwaterfall down that way, dangerous, stremely perilous, mmm, aint that right, my little river lily?

Tutty passed the washing basket to Clematis Roselea. “Rocksarapids! Wed do well tstay away from that lot. Keep tight old of that tiller, Duddle!

“Never fear, my darlin damselfly, the fat smiling hedgehog reassured her. “I have it within my viselike grip, no harm will befall the family. Hmm, just a thought, Bryony, but dyou think yore friend the ferret may have drifted that way? He could very well have strayed into the slipstream, not bein used to the currentsnflows.

Bryony looked up from a piece of pie. “Do you think so, sir? If he did, how would we find out?

Duddle indicated a spot on the left bank farther along. “Thats where the slipstream is, well pull over an hove to land when we get past it. Ill ask Ilfril, a mean-tempered creature if ever there was onebest let me do the talkin.

It was a difficult business keeping the raft in mid river while passing the slipstream. Bryony helped Duddle to control the tiller. When they were safe downriver from the side-pulling current, they hauled the raft onto the high bank, securing it to a crack willow with a stout rope. Duddle Poilspike led them back along the bank until they reached the slipstream. It flowed on a slight downhill gradient, very fast and smooth, losing itself as it twisted and turned into the distance, where a big green-sloped mountain stood out clear against the cloudless sky. Duddle tapped the side of his nose, cautioning them to be silent. Planting his bottom firmly on the edge of the bank, he dangled both footpaws in the water and spoke aloud as if to himself.

“Perfect day for a spot o fishin!

A squeaky, ill-tempered voice answered him. “Clear off! Youre not fishin on my stretch of river!

The overhanging plants on the banks edge parted and a sour-faced bankvole clambered out and waved a knobbly stick at Duddle. “Hah! I shouldve known itd be you, Poilspike. Now go on, shift yerself off my bank!

Duddle grinned from ear to ear, teasing the bankvole. “Oh, cheer up, Ilfril, an give us a smile, you know Im not fishin. Come on, laugh, yore face wont crack.

The bankvole scowled and swiped at the reeds with his stick. “What dyou want around here, then?

“Lookin for a ferret, friend o the molenmousemaid yonder. Did he pass along this stretch perchance?

Ilfril scratched his stubby chin thoughtfully, saying, “I dont give information freely to trespassers, yknow.

Tutty Poilspike produced a thick wedge of the pear-and-red-currant tart from beneath her apron. “Parsnipsnperiwin-kles! We didnt expect nothin for nothin off you, ole crabapple face. Take this, its moren the likes o you deserves!

Ilfril grabbed the slice of pie, his eyes darting hither and thither as if somebeast were trying to trick him. “Ferret, eh, saw im last night, late on, sittin astride a willow log. Dozy oaf! Fast asleep, didnt ave the sense to rouse imself an keep to mid river. Shot off down the slipstream snorin like an edgeog. Huh! That unll get a rude awakenin, I can tell yer!

The bankvole clambered back into his den, dragging the pie slice with him, muttering and complaining. “Got what ywant, now make yerselves scarce an give a creature a bit o peace.

Duddle placed a friendly paw on Bryonys head. “So, there you have it, my little bankblossom, yore ferret has taken a turn for the worse. This is where our paths must part; I couldnt risk lifenIimb takin my family down the slipstream, tis a wild an dangerous waterway. I wouldnt advise any creature to follow it.

Togget gazed at the swift-flowing water. “Hurr, nor wudd oi, zurr, but missie Broinee, shem bounden to foller ee rascal, tho oi doant knows why.

Tutty agreed wholeheartedly with the mole. “Fiddlesnfollies! After wot youve told me about that ferret I wouldnt pass im the time o day nor a piece o pie. Why does an onest mousemaid like yoreself go chasin after such an evil vermin?

Bryony gave the only answer she could. “Because Im responsible for him. Ive cared for Veil since he was a babe, and bad or good I cannot desert him.

Tutty gave Bryony a careful embrace, as is the way with hedgehogs, overcome with admiration for the mousemaid.
“Summersnstrawberries! This earthd be a better place if there were more like yer, missie!

Veil was enjoying himself. It was early morn with the sun rising hot, and flickering light patterns danced on the fast current as the boughs of graceful alders from each bank formed a canopy over the stream. The young ferret ate some candied fruit and an oatfarl from the haversack, scooping up the clear rushing water in his paws to drink. Not knowing he had veered from the river, he leaned forward on the willow trunk, allowing the spray to wet his face. The stream was deep, smooth, and swift, and wherever he was bound it was better than plodding by paw. Sometimes he drew his knife and slashed through the green-shaded waters at passing fish, but they were far too quick for him. Veil was about to lie on his back and take a nap, when an unexpected turn in the stream course made him grab tight hold of his log.

The willow began to bump up and down on the widening stream, and he had to start fending off rocks that sprang up in his path. Leaving the shelter of the trees, the dashing water bounded through a high-walled gorge. The log struck an underwater ledge and bounced high, coming down with a juddering splash. Veil began to feel frightened. He clung grimly to his perch in the splayed fork of the willow trunk, thoroughly drenched and shivering from a combination of fear and cold water. Steering the log to the bank was out of the question; it bucked and rolled as it plunged headlong into a series of rapids. Blinded by the spray, Veil gripped the bark until his paws were numb, while the deafening noise of rushing water pounding in his ears drowned out his own screams. Blinking furiously, he made out a mist-clouded rainbow ahead, then the log struck a rock and turned sideways, slowly at first, then picking up speed on the boiling current until it was spinning around like a top. Then it turned over and Veil was in the water, screeching, yelling, and choking on icy mouthfuls. Clunk! The butt end of the willow trunk struck his head. Unaware of the unearthly roar and awesome drop, the senseless ferret hurtled over the cascading top of the waterfall.

Bryony and Togget stood, waving on the bank, a bulging haversack between them. Pulling out into mid river, the big untidy raft sailed off, its line of washing fluttering like stately banners. They shouted their good-byes to the Pollspike family, who were grouped around the tiller at the aft end of the flat craft.

“Thank you for everything, friends; fortune sail with you! “Goom-bye, zurr Duddle an ee famberly, thankee gurtly! The hedgehogs waved cheerily, returning the farewells. “Seasons be good to you; well meet again I hope! “Rocksnrivers! Of course we will, take good care of yore-selves, an give that ferret a kick from me! “Yeth, cut hith tail off with

a thingle thwipe! The last thing they heard was young Clematis Roselea, as her father held her up high, singing aloud:

“If Im very, very good, my mama bakes me pies;

Hogmaids never should bring tears

To their dear mamas eyes.

I scrub my face quite hard each morn,

And keep my dress so clean,

And to my little brother dear,

Im never ever mean!

Togget waved at the receding raft, pausing to blink away a tear. “Theym vurry dear beasts, oi diddent moind ee liddle un a jumpen on moi stummick, hurr no!

Making fair progress on the sloping stream bank, the two travelers strode easily along through lush grass and sheltering foliage toward the mountain, following the course of the stream. Before they left the trees at midday, Togget discovered blackberries, their stalks winding around a thick lavender clump. Dangling their footpaws into the water, Bryony and Togget sat on the bank, sharing a heap of the dark juicy berries. A flicker from the far bank caught Bryonys eye; she saw a small bankvole watching them from the shelter of some overhanging ivy.

The mousemaid smiled and waved at the little creature. “Hello there, its very beautiful around here. Would you like some blackberries? Here you are!

She threw the berries across the stream, and the bankvole quickly gathered them and stuffed his face greedily. He stood watching for more, his mouth and chin stained purple. Bryony threw him a few more and inquired after Veil. “Did you see a ferret pass this way on a log?

Immediately the tiny creature began dancing up and down the bank, pointing animatedly and gibbering. “Yis yis! Ferret went down tharraway, right down ferret went! Yeeheehee! Ferret11 go bumperty bump bump! Cant stop down tharraway, ferretll go yaaaaargh! Right over top o thbig wa-teryfall! Yaaaaargh! Ferretll be smashed tbits

yeeheehee!

Bryony stopped throwing the berries and stamped her foot-paw on the bank, looking sternly at the grinning little bank-vole. “Dont say such awful things!

This seemed to encourage the tiny creature; he leapt in the air, waving his paws wildly. “Ferret smashed inta likkle bits! Yeeheehee! Lotsa bits! Head one place, paws anuther, fur everywhere, tail inna nundred bits. Smashed ferret! Yeehee-heehee!

Bryony gathered the remainder of the blackberries huffily. “Come on, Togget, were leaving here. That impudent creature isnt getting any more berrieswere going!

The little bankvole pursued them, shouting from the opposite side as he skipped and danced along. “All smashed inta ferrety bits! Yeeheehee! Belly smashed, dinner all overa place, teeths everywhere, eyes smashed, eeyukka! Nose in bits, blood too, allover allover alloveraplace. Bloods everywhere off smashed ferret! Yeeheeheehee!

He continued in this manner until Togget put both digging claws into either side of his mouth, pulled his lips wide, and stuck out his tongue, making a grotesque face at the bankvole. Still jumping and skipping, the little bankvole returned the insult, squinching his nose and waggling his ears. Unfortunately, he did not look where he was going and went smack into an alder. Sitting flat on the ground, he nursed a bruised jaw and set up a fearful yowl. “Waaahaaah! Urted me face! Waaahaaahaaah! “

Bryony shook her head reprovingly at her molefriend. “Tut, tut, really, Togget, did you have to?

“Hurr, hurr, at least et stopped im a goin on abowt bits o furret, missie, oi wurr beginnin tfeel quoit ill.

When they reached the gorge top the afternoon grew hot, but as the sheer sides lessened, spray from the rapids hit the two friends like a welcome, cooling drizzle. Bryony looked at the wild rapids, foaming and leaping as they dashed downhill towards the mountains.

“Look at that water! No wonder Duddle said he wouldnt dare take the raft down this way. Its dreadful!

Togget pointed ahead. “Yurr oi think et wursens yonder, ark at ee roaren et makes!

A short distance farther on they saw the mist-shrouded rainbow, and the roar increased in volume until they had to shout aloud at each other to be heard above it.

Soaked and bewildered, they found a small cavelike crevice to one side of the waterfalls edge. Crouching inside, Togget dug out a turnip-and-watercress flan, and they shared it, together with a flask of cowslip cordial. They peered in fascination at the colossal torrent, falling so far down that it was lost in an almost solid white spray of mist.

“Whurr do et all go to, miz Broinee?

“Im not certain, Togget, but I think it must fall into some big lake below and stream off into the mountains.

Bryony suddenly realized how close to the mountains they were; the falls seemed to drop into their very side. “Well, Ill have to figure out a way to get down there to the bottom of this waterfall. If Veil was here, he couldnt avoid going over. What an awful thing to happen to anybeast, Togget.

“Hurr aye, missie, oi knows tis ard, but us doant sped to foind maister Veil still aloive, do us?

Bryony clasped the moles paw earnestly. “You dont have to go down there, Togget. I wont have you risking your life to find Veil.

The good moles face was earnest as he replied, “Oi doant go, then youm baint goen. Oi cummed this furr with ee, Broinee, burr, an oi baint aven ee riskin yore young loif furr ee wuthless vurmin alone, no zurr!

It was evening before they were ready to descend the slippery rocks. The two friends were ill equipped for their task; after an exhaustive search of the area, all they came up with was a few short lengths of vine. Using their belts and the haversack sling, they knotted them all together. Bryony fastened one end to Toggets waist and the other round her own, and wordlessly they set off down the slick, water-worn rock face, with the deafening din of the torrent ringing in their ears. Bryony went first, Togget taking the strain as she scrabbled and slid to a smooth ledge. She waited until he had scrambled down beside her before taking a look around.

There seemed no way off the ledge, except for a series of rocky protuberances on one side, half covered by the falling water. Carefully

the mousemaid lowered herself to the first one, feeling Togget slip slightly as he was pulled by the tension on their lifeline. He waved a digging claw to show he was all right, and she began the descent to the next. Suddenly a chunk of driftwood hurtling past on the waterfall struck Bryony, and she slipped, but managed to grab on to a spur. Battered by the falls and fighting for breath, she hung on tight, barely able to hear her molefriend above the pounding cascade.

“Oim cummen, missie, old on!

As Togget climbed down to her, he edged too near the waterfall; it caught him and swept him away like a leaf in a gale. A split second later, Bryony screamed as the improvised rope tautened like a bowstring and catapulted her off the spur after him. Bound together, both mole and mousemaid were carried off by the raging waterfall.

Swartt had been going long and hard. He had cleared the big hills behind Salamandastron in two days, without either food or sleep, but now he had to rest, to stop awhile before he dropped. The Warlord crouched beside a stream flowing out onto the heathland, his tongue lolling from one side of his mouth. Panting like a winded dog, he awaited the arrival of the rest. The vixen fell in a breathless heap alongside him and splashed water into her open mouth with both paws.

Swartt kicked her. “Sbad for yer, itll make yer sick, ywont be able to run!

Nightshade lay back, her flanks twitching and quivering. “Makes no difference now, Lord. Im old, I cant run anymore, whether you want me to or not!

The ferret pawed water over the back of his neck. “So, whatre you goin tdo, vixen, stop here an be slain by the badger? Thats whatll happen if you dont move.

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Nightshade watched the rest lolloping up and dropping exhausted by the stream. “Ive got a plan, Sire, listen. You take five and twenty with you, leave me the rest with some bows and arrows. Look to the east theresee that fringe? Its woodlands. Keep low and stay in the stream; tis only shallow, but the water will cover your tracks. Once you make it to the trees, wait there for me. I still have poison. We will lay an ambush; those who are hunting us will be coming fast, with the badger in the lead. They wont be expecting a sudden shower of poison shafts. Well let fly at them, then well use the streambed to follow you. I think my idea is our best hope.

Swartt stared curiously at his seer. “Yer an odd one, vixen, why would you do this fer me?

Nightshade closed her eyes. “You are not defeated yet, Lord. I follow my visions. I see the badger laid low at your footpaws, you standing atop of a mountain, smiling and victorious....

Swartts eyes lit up, and he leaned toward Nightshade. “More, tell me more, what dyou see then?

The seer opened her eyes and shrugged. “Then it gets hazy and I see an old female badger, silver with seasons, very ancient and wise looking, then I wake.

The Warlord brought his chain-mailed sixclaw down hard. “The badger laid low, me victorious. This is a good dreamits not over yet. As for your old silver female badger, when Ive finished with Sunflash Ill find her an slay er!

Nobeast was more surprised than Sunflash the Mace when Rockleg and Fleetrunn caught up with him. He was facing the bottom of the final hill when the two hares came loping swiftly along and saluted him.

“Splendid day for huntin vermin, Sire, wot! The badger halted, his chest heaving as he sucked in air. “Where in the name of fur did you two spring from?

Fleetrunn gestured over her shoulder. “Actually, theres more followin, were the jolly old front-runners, makin the pace, scoutin ahead, an so on. She unslung a canteen from her back. “Here, Sire, care for a drop

o the ole oatnbarley water? Rather good in this hot weather, yknow.

Gratefully, Sunflash took a brief sip, scanning the sky. Skar-lath came soaring out of the blue and landed beside him. “Kreeh! Eight vermin and the vixen are awaiting your arrival over this hill. They are laying an ambush, with archers!

“Well sighted, my friend. What of the Sixclaw, where is he?

“Swartt and the rest are following a shallow streambed toward the forest to the east, staying in the water so that they cannot be tracked.

Sunflash turned to the two horses. “Here is what well do. You wait here until the rest of your Long Patrol arrives; Im going off to skirt this hill and pick up the streambed south of here. Watch the sky; when you see Skarlath dive then you may charge the vermin, but do it carefully, keep out of arrow range. When you hear me attack then come in fast. Take your Long Patrol to this hilltop and watch for my hawks signal.

It was hot and uncomfortable in the depression around the stream, and those with Nightshade were anxious and impatient. The shallow water had been warmed by the sun, and the presence of the vermin caused a cloud of midges and gnats to descend upon them. Nightshade swatted at the insects, sweat blurring her vision as she tried to focus on the hillslope in front of her. A quarrelsome rat drank some stream water and spat it out, complaining, “Yurk! Doesnt taste too good after twenny odd pair o dirty paws ave been sloshin through it!

Tension hummed on the air as the vixen snapped at him, “Then dont drink it, fool, keep your eyes on the slope and your claws on that bowstring. Lord Sixclaw wants no slipups.

A burly weasel scoffed as he spoke his thoughts aloud. “No slipups eh? Lissen, mate, its been one long round of slipups since I took up with this lot, an who was the one who did all the slippin up, eh? Ole Sixclaw, thats who!

The vixen stared hard at the burly wease!. “Ill tell Lord Swartt you said that when we catch up with him in the forestor would you sooner tell him yourself? You look like a big brave beast.

The rat who had complained about the water signaled the vixen. “Look, atop of the ill, I kin see those ares, theyre watchin us!

Nightshade could barely see a few javelin tips and long ears poking

over the hilltop. “Aye, theyre up there sure enough. Strange, I wonder what theyre waiting for?

The burly weasel ventured an opinion. “Some sorta signal maybe?

Then the vixen spotted Skarlath, hovering halfway between the streambed and the hares. “Thats it, the badgers hawk, it must be able to see something that we cant. Ill stop it spying on us!

Wiping the moisture from her eyes, the vixen rubbed dirt on her paws to prevent them from slipping. She selected an arrow, sighting down the shaft to make sure it was straight and true, from feathered flight to poisoned barb. Testing the air with her eartip, Nightshade noted with satisfaction that there was not even a slight breeze to ruffle the still summer noon. Notching the shaft to her bowstring, she took aim and drew the arrow back until the yew-wood bow bent almost to a perfect semicircle.

Then Skarlath dropped from the sky, giving the signal.

Nightshade was quick. She dropped her aim instantly and fired. The arrow struck home. Skarlath gave a piercing cry, and his wide wings flopped loose as he tumbled to earth.

The vixen turned in triumph to the others when she saw Sunflash charging along the streambed from around the bend in the hill. Her courage drained from her. The huge Badger Lord pounded toward her, bellowing out his grief and rage. Dropping the bow, she fled, deserting the vermin in the depression. They turned too late. Sunflash was among them with an earsplitting roar.

“Skarlaaaaath!

On top of the hill, Sabretache heard the Badger Lords anguished cry and saw the hawk lying halfway down the hill, a bundle of feathers and a broken arrow. The hare Captain drew his saber.

“Long Patrol! Eeulaliaaaaaa!

The hares came charging down the hill, dust rising in clouds from their paws, weapons at the ready. With a bound they sprang into the depression. The stream was slowly being dammed, choked by dead vermin and smashed weapons. The berserk Badger Lord had done his work, and now he was gone. Sabretache signaled them forward, and they rushed off in a spray of streamwater, following the shallow bed toward the distant forest.

Nightshade ran as she had never done before. Paws pounding, brushy tail standing out behind like a streamer, her heart banged like a trip-hammer as she fought to suck in the hot air. The wound in Sunflashs footpaw had reopened, tinging the stream water red as he sped roaring in the wake of the beast who had slain Skarlath. Terror lent speed to the vixen; she dashed for the shelter of the forest, well ahead of the badger, though a quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that he was beginning to shorten the gap between them. Blinded by tears and aching all over from battle wounds, the Badger Lord pursued his enemy doggedly, determined to catch up with the lighter, swifter fox.

Swartt was well within the woodlands, ravaging a wild cherry tree with the rest of his vermin. He turned swiftly at the approaching patter of paws. It was a stoat he had left on watch at the forest edge.

“Lord, I climbed a tree and saw your vixen, gasped the stoat. “She is running fast toward these woods, with the badger hard on her tail. There are no others; he mustve slain those you left to ambush him. It looks like Nightshade escaped! There are hares, too, more than half a score, coming up fast!

The Warlord did not hesitate. He took off north into the trees, taking his band with him. “The vixen bungled the ambush, he growled. “If the badger catches her, well, thats er lookout. If not shell pick up our tracks an find us. But that badger an his hares can track too, so move yerselves if you want ter stay alive!

Nightshade made the forest cover on trembling limbs. Expecting Swartt and the others to be waiting there, she slowed her pace as she dashed into the trees, yelling for assistance. “Lord, the badgers after me! Get him! Cut him down!

But no help was forthcoming. Staggering with exhaustion the vixen loped off through the woodland. The crash of heavy footpaws pounding through the undergrowth in her wake caused Nightshade to turn her head fearfully. She tripped over an exposed tree root and fell flat. She managed to scramble halfway up before a huge footpaw knocked her down again. Sunflash the Mace stood over her, tears coursing down the golden stripe, his massive paws shaking with fury as he raised the great war club. Nightshade scrabbled against the earth. “No, Lord! Mercy pi... Yaaaaaggh!

Sabretache leapt over the carcass of the dead seer, following the trampled undergrowth to where the badger lay, too exhausted to rise and shaking with grief, now that the bloodwrath had left him.

“Skarlath, he wept. “Skarlath, my true friend. The hare sheathed his blade, speaking low to his followers. “Camp here tonight, itll be twilight soon. Rockleg, Fleetrunn, attend to Lord Sunflash, rebind his wounds. Hedgepaw, see if you can fetch some clean water from the stream; the rest of you stand easy. Well pick up the ferrets trail at dawn.

Refreshed by his rest in the woods while waiting on the results of the ambush, Swartt drove his band hard. Soon after dawn be came across a wide river flowing down through the trees. Halting his band for a short rest, he drank sparingly and waded in to test the depth of the water. The weasel called Grayjaw waded into the shallows beside him. “It looks deep in the middle, Chief. Wonder where this river goes?

Swartt was not listening. He was facing upstream, staring at the green slopes of the distant mountains.

“Up on yer paws, you idlers, he shouted to the horde. “Thats where were bound, the mountains upriver. Stay in the shallows, stick tthe water, itll make trackin difficult fer the badger. Come on!

Grayjaw splashed alongside the Warlord. “But Chief, what about Nightshade? You said shed be able to follow our trail.

Swartt looked pityingly at the weasel. “If the vixen was goin to catch us up shed ave done it durin the night. Ferget that one, Im more concerned about that badger an his hares. If we can make it tthose mountains, Ill think up a good plan to deal with em.

Sunflash and the Long Patrol were a day behind Swartt and his band. They arrived at the river in the late evening and made camp on the bank.

Sabretache inspected me bruised and broken overhead foliage of the trees that dipped to the waters edge. “Hmm, about a score an five of em, tryin tput us off the trail by takin to the water. See herewillow branch cracked, leaves bruised an damaged on that rowan farther along. Hmph! One of em even stepped ashore for a while an left a few pawprints on the bank edge. See, a stoat.

Sunflash had waded in almost waist deep, wanting to feel the cold current pushing against him. He stared up at the mountains, distant in the gathering dusk of the dry summer day. “Well take only a short rest now and travel by night, he said. “Its cooler and we dont need to track any longer. Swartt has gone to the mountains, I feel it in me. When he attacked Salamandastron I thought we would meet there, but it was

not to be. Still, one mountain is as good as another when theres a score to be settled with a six-clawed ferret!

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Bryony regained her senses in a pale flickering world. Somewhere close by, the sounds of the waterfall carried to her, echoing all around. She was draped across a rock slab, up to her waist in water. Toggets face was next to hers; he was still unconscious, but breathing slowly. Surprised that she was still alive, the mousemaid stood swaying groggily with the water lapping gently around her. As she heaved Toggets limp body up onto the rock, she noticed that the lifeline had held. Unfastening it from both their waists, Bryony coiled the line and shouldered it.

She climbed up on the rock slab alongside the mole and took stock of their surroundings. It was a gigantic cavern inside the mountain. Redwall Abbey would have easily fit into it, with room to spare. The waterfall formed a broad river, dotted with rock islands and natural stepping-stones. Luminosity from the river flickered all round, forming shifting liquid light patterns on the high rock walls and surfaces. It was a timeless world where neither night nor day held sway, forever bathed in its own pale radiance, constantly echoing to the sound of water everywhere, flowing, falling or trickling.

Their food haversack came floating gently by. Bryony hooked it out and emptied the contents onto the rock slab. The fruit was all right; she wiped off an apple and took a bite.

Togget stirred, opening his eyes slowly. “Yurr, be this place Dark Forest? Taint loik oi magined et tbe. Broinee, be usns dead or still alivin?

The mousemaid chuckled and unstoppered a flask of dan-del ion-and-burdock cordial. She passed it to Togget, who sat up blinking like an owl, and drank deeply. “Hoourr! Thats betterer, missie. Yurr usns shorely landed en a roight strange burrow.

The mousemaid relieved him of the flask. “Well at least were still alive. Most of our food is ruined by the water, thougha bit of fruit and this cordial seems to be all we have. Rest awhile here, then well search for Veil. If weve survived the waterfall then Im sure he did.

Togget wrung moisture from his tunic. “Burr, wot ifn ee diddent survoive?

The mousemaid was unwilling to contemplate such an idea. “Dont say that, Togget. He is alive, Im almost certain he is.

The faithful mole shook his velvety head. “Hurr, Broinee, youm wasten yore loif a-chasen after yon furret, eem a bad-beast an will bring youm nought but arm!

Bryony packed what little food was still edible into the wet haversack and started the search. “Veil wasnt always bad. Remember when he was a tiny Dibbun? He was such a nice babe. Hell change one day, youll see.

Splash! A large rock hit the water nearby. “Hell change! Hell change! a voice echoed eerily. “Hahaha! Are you fools still followin me?

Bryony whirled and looked upward. Veil was standing on a ledge behind them, the luminescent light playing oddly across his face. He waved a crimsoned paw at them and vanished into a dark crack in the cave wall.

Bryony clambered over the wet rocks, with Togget following. She shouted as she made her way to the spot where Veil had been. “Wait, Veil, please wait for us! Hes alive, Togget, I knew it! The crack turned out to be a concealed entrance to a winding tunnel. Hurriedly the two friends pursued Veil into the dank, musty darkness.

The young ferret crouched in a niche, hidden from Bryony and Togget. They dashed by, bumping and stumbling blindly, trying to catch up, as they thought, with Veil. Sniggering silently to himself, the ferret listened to their footpaws recede down the dark tunnel. It had been easy to trick them. He made his way back out onto the ledge, intending to run off and leave diem searching the winding tunnel for him.

Then he noticed the slab. It was a broad, heavy oblong of rock precariously perched higher up on the brink of another ledge. Veil climbed nimbly up to it and found that he had only to lean on the slab and it rocked. Rubbing his paws together delightedly, he began rocking the big flat piece of stone. The harder he pressed and jerked both paws on it, the more it rocked. With a groan it slid forward and downward a little. Veil could hear Bryony and Togget calling him; they were obviously coming back to the tunnel entrance. He jumped wildly on the tilting rock, bouncing up and down for all he was worth; the rock wobbled perilously on the brink of the ledge, inching forward, then it went altogether. Veil threw himself from the teetering

slab; sitting down hard on the ledge, he watched the stone slip over the edge. It slid down, stopping only when it reached the lower ledge, blocking the crack that formed the tunnel entrance. The ferrets face was a picture of fiendish delight as he climbed down to survey his work.

The slab was wedged immovably into the crack, sealing the tunnel. He leaned his back against it, laughing. “Hahaha! Now try an follow me, Abbey oafs!

He could hear the frantic scratching from the other side of the slab. Bryonys voice was shocked and reproving. “Veil! What have you done? Let us out of here. Please!

The young ferret turned and walked away. “Why dont yer try movin it with kindness? Good-bye an good riddance to the both of yer!

“That was neatly done!

The big lean ferret, surrounded by a score or more heavily armed vermin, stood paw on sword-hilt, watching Veil. He came forward, walking around the young ferret, inspecting him curiously from ear to footpaw.

“Friends of yores, were they? he said.

Veil eyed the other coolly. “Dont have friendsthey were my enemies!

One or two of the vermin hordebeasts, who had followed Swartt since the early days, began nudging each other and nodding toward the two ferrets. Apart from their age difference they were almost identical, the one being almost a younger edition of the elder.

Swartt fixed the young ferret with his piercing gaze. “Whats yer name, an how did yget ere?

The young ferret stared boldly back at the Warlord.I came in over the waterfall; they call me Veil Sixclaw the Outcast!

There was an audible gasp from the hordebeasts as Veil continued, “I know who you are, youre Swartt Sixclaw the Warlord!

They stood with their eyes locked, staring each other down.

Swartt smiled mirthlessly, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Yer a hard-faced brat, arent yer? Veilwho gave you a name like that?

Before Veil could reply, Grayjaw came splashing along from the far end of the cave, shouting, “Chief! The badger an those ares are comin upriver, theyll be ere in a couple of hours!

Swartt pointed to the ledges and craggy galleries leading into the darkness overhead. “Cmon, lets see which way that takes us!

Veil stood in Swartts path. “What about me? I can fight.

The Warlord brushed him aside contemptuously. “Stay out o my way, brat, I got enough trouble tdeal with!

Veil smiled thinly. “Aye, so it seems. Looks like the badger defeated yer an yer on the run. Huh, some Warlord!

Swartt almost lost his balance. Stung by the insult, he shot a venomous glare at the young ferret as he began climbing. “Step careful around me, whelpa smart tongue could be the death of yer!

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Sabretache stood out in the shallows, peering at the dark, shaded cave where the river exited from the mountain. He signaled to Rockleg and Fleetrunn. “Scout it out, chaps, go easy, see the villain hasnt laid any traps, ambushes, or nasty surprises.

The hares sat on the bank, making a hasty meal while they awaited the return of the Long Patrol scouts. Sunflash sat apart from them, the food by his paw untouched, two great rivulets scored deep from eye to jaw where his tears had run. Brad-berry sat next to Sabretache, watching the Badger Lord from the corner of his eye.

Sunflash took a leaf, split it, and pressed it to his lips, then he blew, producing a long, high-pitched whistling sound, then he dropped the leaf and watched it float away downriver. A great shuddering sigh ran through him as he buried his gold-striped face in both paws.

Bradberry whispered to the hare Captain, “What did he do that for?

“That was the way he called Skarlath sometimes, old lad. They were tgether a jolly long time, doncha know. Itll take some seasons before he stops grievin, poor chap.

It was not long before the scouts were back. They reported the way clear. Weapons drawn, the hares entered the cave, wading through the river with Sunflash in the lead. Once inside, the scouts went ahead again. Sunflash and the others gathered on a rock islet in midriver. Standing silently, they stared into the pale, eerie stillness of the huge cavern.

Sabretache drew his blade. “Hist! Whats that noise?

It was a clack-clacking sound, as if somebeast were knocking one rock against another. Bradberry murmured to Hedgepaw, “It could be them, tayin a trap for us, maybe. Wheres the sound comin from?

Hedgepaw looked about and shrugged. “Hard tsay, too much echo an waternoise in here. I say, is that Rockleg an Reetrunn comin back?

Rockleg made his report to Sunflash. “Thumpin great waterfall back there, they never went that way.

Sunflash looked up at the high ledges and galleries winding away into

the darkness above, and nodded. “Then theyre in here somewhere. Sabretache, take the Long Patrol outside and climb to the top of the mountain. Its my guess thats where Swartt will be making for. Ill stay in here and find my way up from the inside; we may be able to trap them in between us. Those are my orders. Go!

The hare Captain saw it was useless arguing, but he tried. “Sire, praps youd best take Rockleg an Fleetrunn with you.

The Badger Lord splashed into the water and began wading to the side of the cave where the ledges began. “Ill be all right on my own. Do as I say!

Sabretache decided it was better not to argue further.

When the hares had gone, Sunflash stopped a moment. The clacking noise could still be heard echoing amid the water-sounds of the cavern. He climbed onto the first ledge, and the sound seemed to grow closer. Moving along the natural rock step, he stopped by a large slab.

Clack! Clack! Clack!

Sunflash pressed his muzzle to a narrow crack between the slab and the ledge. “Is there somebeast there? he shouted.

The noise stopped and a voice called back, “Burr aye, thurr be two of usns trapped en yurr!

The badger gave the rock a few solid thumps with his paw. He felt a very slight movement. “Ill try and get you out of there. Stand back!

Climbing onto the ledge above, Sunflash found he could reach the top of the slab with both footpaws. Bracing his back, he pressed his full weight upon the slab and began pushing outward. The slab keeled forward, then jammed. “Ive pushed the top away a bit, he called down. “Climb up the slab; you should be able to squeeze out over the top. Here, get hold of this.

Holding his mace upside down, he thrust it in the space, with the handle cord dangling down. Bryonys voice reached him. “Ive got itcan you give me a tug out, please?

Sunflash hauled her swiftly out. Togget took a bit longer because of his plumpness, but he finally popped out like a round furry stopper.

As introductions were being made, there was a screech, and

something splashed into the river. Sunflash waded in and came out carrying a bat with an arrow piercing its wing.

Bryony came forward to help him. “Oh, the poor creature. Lay him down here, sir! she cried.

Fortunately the shaft had done no great damage, merely piercing the filmy wing membrane. Bryony snapped the shaft and drew the end carefully out, speaking gently. “There, that didnt hurt, did it. Youll soon be as good as new when it heals.

The bat bared its small fangs in what appeared to be a smile, thanking the mousemaid in a soft sibilant whisper. “My thanks, thanks. I am Lord Duskskin, ruler of Bat Mountpit, Mountpit. Up above is my territory, territory. Wicked creatures are there; they are armed, armed. My bats can do nothing against them, nothing against them.

Duskskin gave them a brief description of his encounter with Swartt and the hordebeasts, with his curious, echoing speech. Sunflash interrupted him. “The vermin are my enemies. I am sworn to slay them. Can you show us the way up to where they are, Lord Duskskin?

The ruler of Bat Mountpit blinked his tiny pinpoint eyes. “You are a mightybeast, carry me, carry me, I will show you.

High above in the far upper reaches of the mountain a dozen or more bat corpses littered the rock ledges. Swartt and his beasts had stopped to rest briefly, ducking their heads as angry bats homed in on them. A rat let fly an arrow and it bounced off the stones, dropping out of sight into the dizzying chasm below.

Veil watched the rat notch another shaft to his bow. “Do you always let them waste arrows like that upon creatures that cant harm you? he sneered.

Swartt aimed a glancing blow at a passing bat. “Keep yer mouth shut, brat, cos if a bat dont fly down it then my blade will!

Veil looked up at the slender shaft of sunlight coming from somewhere above them. “Well, you sit ere thinkin up clever insults an lettin these wall-eyed idiots waste their arrows. Im climbin up ahead to see where that lights comin from.

Swartt snarled, half drawing his sword as Veil pushed past him. The young ferret grabbed a hefty chunk of rock and tossed it threateningly from paw to paw. “Draw that blade an Ill let daylight into yer skull!

Swartt did not attempt to pull his sword out; he sneered upward as Veil began climbing. “Hah! Big talk fer a pup still wet beind the ears. Once Im done wid the badger Ill fix you, thats a promise!

Veil smiled easily down from a crag he had just surmounted. “Talks cheap, deadpawwell see who fixes who in the end! Without a backward glance, he continued his ascent.

The rat was about to fire another arrow, when Swartt laid him flat with a blow from his chain-mailed sixclaw. “Stop wastin those shafts, maggotbrain, you couldnt hit the sea if you was standin on the edge of the shore!

Youthful agility soon brought Veil up to the source of the light. It was coming from a knothole of a small timber door set into the rock. Pulling aside the bar that held it closed, he kicked the door open and crawled out. Blinking in the sunliglit, Veil found himself looking down from the mountaintop. He walked around a fiat plateau.

Far below the hares could be seen, toiling upward through the steep, bush-and-shale-coated mountainside. It was but the work of a moment for Veil to tumble loose chunks and slabs of the shale down at them. He watched, sniggering like a malicious Dibbun as the missiles started up small avalanches of loose scree and rock. Hares dived for cover and hung on to the deeper-rooted bushes, helpless because of the distance and unable to return arrow, sling stone, or javelin at their tormentor. Veil chuckled to himself; this was real power. He loosened more slabs and watched them hurtle and bounce off down the slopes in clouds of reddish dust. The young ferret wished fervently that it might have been Redwallers and not hares that he held at his mercy.

Meanwhile, Sun flash climbed stealthily up through the rocky galleries, holding the Bat Lord Duskskin on one shoulder and listening to his whispering repetitive directions. Bry-ony and Togget were no trouble; the big badger lifted them up onto the rocks ahead, one in each paw, as if they weighed nothing at all.

Togget was staggered by the might of their goldstriped friend. “Yurr, ee bes a gurt strong un, oi feels loik a liddle pebble bein chucked abowt, hurr, eem gentle tho!

Duskskin cautioned the mole to be silent. “Quiet now, quiet. Foebeasts are not far above us, far above us.

Unfortunately Swartt had already heard them as the echoes of their voices bounced up from the lower galleries. Since Veil had opened the

door at the mountaintop, there was a fair-sized shaft of light beaming down. Swartt looked up, judging the distance he had left to climb, an idea forming in his mind. He chose the rat he had chastised and three otherstwo stoats and another rat, all armed with bows.

Keeping his voice to a bare minimum, the Warlord whispered, “You four stop here awhile and take care o any bats or smallbeasts thatre followin beind. Ill be up on the mountaintop with the others. Come an join us there when the coasts clear down ere. Thats a nice soft job for ye, eh!

Silently Swartt led the other vermin off toward the high exit.

Sunflash had just placed Togget on a rocky outcrop above his head when an arrow came hissing down like a snake and struck the mole in his shoulder. Swiftly the badger lifted the mole down and placed him alongside Bryony, saying, “Hes been wounded. Take care of him and dont make a sound! Then, laying aside his mace, Sunflash selected two good-sized throwing rocks and popped his head out into full view. The rat saw him and fumbled to get shaft onto bowstring as Sun-flash flung a rock, hard and accurately.

Thud!

It struck the rat, knocking him off his perch. Silently he fell, bumping off ledges until he was swallowed up into the dark void of Bat Mountpit. Far below there was a splash.

A stoat showed himself, not far from where the rat had been. “Wots appened to Buskit? Anybeast seeeeeeeee? The second rock knocked him flying into space.

The remaining stoat and rat glimpsed the great striped head as the badger stooped to pick up more rocks, and panic gripped them.

“Lets get outta ere, mate, its the badger!

Stumbling against each other, they scrabbled upward toward the hole. Bats flew out, attacking them as they climbed.

Sunflash turned to Bryony and the Bat Lord. “Stop here and tend to Togget. Ive got to catch those two before they raise the alarm. Dont try to come out onto the mountain until I give you the all clear!

Leaving his mace, Sunflash sped off after the two vermin, heaving his huge frame upward, paw over paw. His legendary swiftness had not

deserted him; swinging from rock to ledge, jumping, and pulling himself upward, the Badger Lord pursued the pair. The rat was scrambling up a smooth stone incline when the relentless paw of Sunflash grabbed his tail and swung him off. He fell, screeching.

Outside, the shades of twilight were beginning to fall. Swartt strode around the plateau, watching as his remaining hordebeasts sent rocks, arrows, spears, and slabs of shale hurtling down the mountainsides to batter the gallant but beleaguered hares, who were still striving to climb up and reach the foebeast. Veil stumped to the edge, staggering under the weight of a jagged slab. He hurled it gleefully down and dusted off his paws.

“Wots the matter, scared o gettin yself dirty? he said insultingly to Swartt. “Huh, some Warlord you are. Ive seen more action from a squashed frog!

“I dunno about squashed frogs, Swartt gritted back angrily, “but youll be a squashed ferret if ytalk like that to me, spindleshanks!

The Warlord left his vermin to their own devices. Crouching next to the opening, he listened intently. He heard the screech of the rat and then the agonized yelling of the remaining stoat as Sunflash caught up with him. Swartt chanced a quick peek into the opening and saw Sunflash, head bowed as he pulled himself upward. It was too good a chance to miss!

Swartt grabbed a big rugged slab of shale with both paws and raised it above his head, rushing to the far side of the opening so he would be behind Sunflash when he emerged.

He was only just in timethe Badger Lord came up so fast that he was halfway out of the hole before Swartt came to a standstill. The Warlord brought the rock crashing down on the back of the badgers skull, hitting him so hard that it broke the slab into two pieces. Sunflash fell senseless, half in and half out of the hole. Swartt yelled to his hordebeasts, “Grab him, get some rope! Pull him out of there and bind him tight!

Ive got the badger!

44?

Down on the rocky outcrop, Togget gritted his teeth bravely. “Hoo urr, oi diddent know arrers urted so much.

Bryony inspected the barbed point of the shaft she had removed from her molefriends shoulder. “Hmm, at least its not poisoned. Youre a lucky mole. Lie still and let Lord Duskskins bats see to the wound.

Togget watched as several bats gathered round him. They stopped the bleeding with skeins of spiderweb, binding the arrow hole with mountain moss and a paste made from some strange type of cave fungus.

The mole swigged deep from a pitcher of lilac-colored liquid. “Umm, this do taste noice, ee flyen mouses be gudd-beasts!

The bats hissing laughter sounded like escaping steam. “Flying mouses! Hihihihiss! Did you hear that, Lord Dusk-skin? The funnybeast calls us flying mouses, flying mouses!

Lord Duskskin glanced up anxiously. “It grows dark, dark. The mighty one has not called you, mousemaid. What is happening, happening?

Bryony curtsied politely to the Bat Lord. “Sire, will you and your creatures take care of Togget until I return? I must go and see what is happening.

The only protection Bryony had was the small knife that had been in their haversack. Gripping it firmly in her teeth, she began climbing slowly toward the exit hole.

A fire glowed in the center of the plateau on the mountain-top. Sentries posted around the edge watched for any movement of the hares during the night. Not far from the fire lay Sunflash the Mace, still unconscious. The badger was bound between two broken spear shafts driven into the surface cracks, footpaws out straight and his forepaws stretched behind his head, the ropes cutting cruelly into them.

Swartt sat by the fire, hardening an ash javelin point in its flames. Veil crouched at the other side of the blaze, watching the Warlord. “So, after many long seasons youve finally caught your enemy, he said.

Swartt rubbed the smoking javelin end against a rock until it was like the tip of a great, dark brown needle, and snarled, “Aye, many, many long seasons, longer than youve lived, brat!

Veil enjoyed baiting Swartt. “Just shows ow clumsy you are; that badgerd ave been slain all those long seasons ago if e was my enemy.

The Warlord smiled, refusing to rise to the bait. “Addle-brain, ow many enemies ave you ever ad, eh?

Veil stared hard across the fire at Swartt. “Oh, dont you worry, Ive got a great enemythe coward Ive never called father, the slimy scum who ran off an left me on a battlefield when I was scarce able to walk. Now thats an enemy whose grave Ill dance on an laugh at!

Swartt pointed the javelin at the inert form of the badger. “Try it an youll die like this one will tomorrow, long an slow, bit by bit, until he screams for me tfinish it!

Bryony raised her head slowly and carefully, noting every detail of the terrible scene on the plateau, from the sentries and the two ferrets at the fire to the still-bound badger between two spear shafts. She knew she had to save Sunflash at any cost. Inching silently from the hole, she flattened herself against the rocks and began squirming forward, the knife blade gripped tight in her teeth. The mousemaid kept herself behind Swartts back, shielding her body from the fire glow and Veil. All the sentries were looking down the mountain, one or two slumbering fitfully.

Something clacked faintly against Bryonys paw; it was a beaker, half full of whatever some hordebeast had been drinking. She paused; neither ferret had heard her over the crackle of the fire. Picking up the beaker, she circled, keeping to Sun-flashs right side and out of the ferrets vision. Inching stealthily forward the mousemaid reached Sunflash. Dark crusted blood stained the goldstriped muzzle; the Badger Lord lay quite still, his mouth slightly open. Holding the beaker up, almost too afraid to breathe, Bryony let the liquid trickle into Sunflashs mouth. Nothing happened for a moment, then the badger coughed and grunted. His head came up slightly, knocking the beaker askew so that the remaining liquid splashed in his face.

Bryony felt the shaft of the javelin strike her hard across her back. She was knocked flat.

“Hahah! Gotcher, mouse! Whatre ydoinere?

Swartt seized her roughly and dragged the mousemaid upright. Sunflash was coughing and gagging on the liquid trapped in his throat as Veil came racing around the fire.

“Yer scummy liddle sneak, you was tryin to set im loose! Swartt roared.

Veil struck Swartt hard in the face, tearing the captive from his grasp. “Bryony, get out of ere. Run!

Swartt flung himself on Veil, and, while the ferrets fought, Bryony ran to where the knife had fallen from her mouth. Grabbing it, she began hacking at the ropes binding the Badger Lords paws, screaming, “Get up! Sunflash! Get up!

Swartt threw his son down and raised his javelin for a throw he could not miss. “The badgers mine! he yelled.

Bryony turned and saw him throw the javelin. Something blurred across the front of her, shouting, “Leave er alone! Uuuuuhh!

Then Veil lay across her footpaws, the javelin protruding horribly where it had exited at his back. Bryony opened her mouth, but no scream would issue forth.

As Swartt ran forward, clawing at his sword, there was an earsplitting roar.

“Eeulaliaaaaaa!

Both spear shafts snapped like twigs as Sunflash shot up from the rocks like a thunderbolt, eyes crimson, teeth bared, the ropes bursting as his huge chest swelled and he flung his paws apart. The sentries turned and, standing like frozen statues, they watched the awful conflict between Warlord and Badger Lord.

Swartts curved blade flickered in the firelight as he struck, gashing his enemys side. Then he raised the sword and swung it a second time, aiming at Sunflashs head. Two great paws caught the blade in midair; the berserk badger tightened his grip on the blade, regardless of the blood that flowed as he did, the warrior spirit of his ancestors rising. The ferret stood open-mouthed as the badger snapped the sword blade, the sharp metallic clang echoing around the mountaintop. Still grasping both halves of the sword, Sunflash came forward with a bound, whirling both paws. He struck Swartt a blow that sounded like a plank hitting a rotten fruit. The force of the blow was so great that

Swartts footpaws left the ground, and he fell poleaxed. Nobeast could come near Sunflash the Mace; filled with the bloodwrath, he seized the ferret in a grip of steel. Heaving Swartt high over his head, Sunflash stood at the plateau edge, bellowing as he flung his enemy out into the night.

“Eeulaliaaaaaaaaaa!

The terrified sentries who had clambered over the plateau edge slid down the shale and scree on their tails. They were met by the vengeful hares of the Long Patrol, who had been racing upward since the first sounds of combat from above.

Helped by several bats, Togget emerged onto the plateau and hurried to Bryonys side. The mousemaid was sitting with Veils head resting in her lap. The young ferrets eyes were clouding over, his breath was hoarse and shallow; almost from the gates of Dark Forest he heard Bryonys voice echoing, “Oh, Veil, my Veil! You saved me.... Why?

“Go ... back to your Abbey ... shouldnt ave followed me... Go way ... let me sleep!

Bryony rocked him gently as she had done when he was a babe. The young ferret closed his eyes.

Thus ended the lives of father and son: Swartt Sixclaw die Warlord, and Veil Sixclaw the Outcast.

45

Three days they camped on the rivers edge at the foot of Bat Mountpit, the full hospitality of Duskskin and his bats at their disposal. Wounds were dressed and weary limbs rested; they were brought fresh fruit, white mushrooms that had never seen the light of day, caveshrimp, and many other strange delicacies from the depths of the curious realm within the mountains.

Sunflash kept making Bryony and Togget repeat anything they knew of his mother, Bella of Brocktree, the great silver badger. He marveled that she was still living, and kept repeating her name over and over. “Bella, Bella, I must see her, I will go to Redwall with you.

For the first time in three days, the mousemaid smiled. “What with my injured back, your cracked skull, and Toggets wounded shoulder, we should just about make up one whole creature to go walking through Redwalls gates.

Sunflash gave orders to his Long Patrol. “Sabretache, you and Colonel Sandgall will command all at Salamandastron until my return. On your way back, search and find my hawk Skarlath, take him to the mountain and bury him high on a sunny slope overlooking the sea. Rockleg and Reetrunn, you will accompany me and our friends to Redwall Abbey.

Lord Duskskin called them from the edge of the cave entrance. “You will leave tonight, tonight. My scouts will go with you and guide you, guide you. I have sent out requests to my friends, friends. The Pollspike raft awaits you two days hence, two days hence. Go in peace, in peace!

A full moon hung like a burnished shield in skies of deep velvet blue, watching the friends making their good-byes. Tog-get had become very fond of the bats and promised he would return to visit them someday. “Hurr, youm watch owt furr Togget, gudd flyen mouses, burr aye!

As the five marched off on a secret route that would take them around the waterfall, hundreds of bats wheeled around them in the night, whispering, “Safe seasons, seasons. Goodbye friends, good-bye, friends,

Skirting the high rocks at dawn, Bryony looked back at the white mist with its rainbow. Sunflash helped her over a small gurgling brook, saying, “Thinking of anything special, mis-sie?

Bending, the mousemaid let the brook water run through her paws. “Oh, yes, sir, Ill never forget the waterfall as long as I live. It was so beautiful, but so dangerous. Ill hear those waters in my dreams for many a long season.

The going was easy, and late summer weather proved pleasant. A leisurely pace was dictated by their healing wounds and the fact that Sunflash wanted to take cuttings and young plants from practically everywhere. Togget taught Rockleg and Fleet-runn to tug at their noses and speak in a rustic manner. Bryony could scarce stifle her laughter at the two hares and the mole, chewing on long straws and presenting the Badger Lord with the strangest things as they affected the tone of bumpkins.

“Oo arr, Lordy Sunnyflash, yurr be a wunnerful stone, may-ap ifn ee plant it, twill grow into a bootiful pebblebush!

Sunflash played them well at their own game, tossing the stone up and batting it out of sight with his mace, aping their speech: “Whoi thankee, gaffer Rockleg, praps if yon pebble sticks up inna sky twill become a shiny star one night!

Early in the morning of the third day, they arrived at the junction of the river and slipstream. Immediately the bankvole Ilfril poked his head out in high bad temper. “Dye know yer tres-passin? Who are yer?

The metal-studded end of a huge battle mace thudded down near the hole entrance, and Ilfril found himself staring into a great, gold-striped badgers face, whose voice boomed out, “I am Sunflash the Mace, Badger Lord of Salamandastron, and I like a bankvole for breakfast each morn. Who are you?

There was a frantic scuttle of paws as Ilfril fled down into his home, followed by a nervous squeak. “Er, haha! Just a pore creature who lives down here an minds his own business, Lord, feel free to walk anywhere!

They sat laughing at the rivers edge, watching the sprawling raft pull up to the bank. Duddle cried out heartily:

“Welcome friends, an jump aboard, Yore welcome to all we can

afford, Theres the wife, two liddle uns, an meself, An plenty o vittles upon the shelf!

Arundo came dashing from the hut in the center of the raft. He stared in awe at the badger and said, “Can I jump on yore thtomach, thir?

Rockleg winked at the little hedgehog. “Of course you can, ole chap, as long as ylet Lord Sunflash jump on yore stomach first, wot?

Clematis Roselea came out to wag a paw at them. “You know what will happen if my mama catches any of you jum-pin on each others stomachs?

Togget smiled and nodded. “Aye, shem cutten our tails offn us wi a single swipe, missie!

Arundo confirmed this with a chopping sweep of his tiny paw. “Thingle thwipe, thtraight off!

Immediately they were aboard; Duddle cast off and lashed the tiller in position. Introductions were made all round and a happy band of voyagers retired to the cabin-hut for a celebration breakfast.

Bryony thought the cabin seemed smaller, though it was only the massive presence of Sunflash within the confined space that created this impression. Even though the fragrant aromas arising from the stove in tantalizing wisps set his mouth to watering, Duddle Pollspike felt it was his duty to first make an announcement.

“Ahem! Good creatures all, before my goodwife, Tutty, an mself serve vittles, allow me to inform you about our course. I have charted a network of navigable waterways that will take us close to Redwall Abbey. So do not be alarmed, friends, you are in good an capable paws. Now, my liddle riverplum, let us show these pore starvelings what a floatin banquet looks like....

Duddle was about to say more, when Tutty raised a ladle ominously. “Faithnfishgills, you ole windbag, are you goin to blather on til suppertime? Stir yore stumps afore I chop yore tail off!

Duddle draped a napkin over his paw, muttering as he gravitated between stove and table, carrying heaped dishes. “To hear is to obey, my violent violet, the banksd be strewn with chopped-off tails if you had yore way. Gangway there, you ravenous rovers, make way for this wild-cherry-an-meadowcream pie, move that jug o cowslip cordial, some-beast.

Eyes widened as dish after dish was brought to table.

“One basin o rivershrimp-an-watercress soup!

“White cheese with sage an acorn, hot rye-bread cottage loaf!

“Almond-an-chestnut slices with red-currant preserve!

“Damson-an1-greengage pudden. Been up since three hours afore dawn cookin all this. Stream-bank salad with hazel-nuts!

Sunflash had both young hogs sitting on his lap. Clematis Roselea clasped his massive paw, cautioning him, “You must be very good, sir, jus like me. Dont dare touch anything until the table is set. Or else ... !

The Badger Lord pulled a frightened face and made the tail-chopping motion. Little Arundo nodded wisely. “Ho yeth, my mama even chopth badgerth tailth off!

Breakfast meandered on until past lunchtime. There was so much to tell: tales of mountain, waterfall, and riverbank filled the cabin hut, and Arundo and Clematis Roselea listened open-mouthed as their elders related stories, histories, and reminiscences. Sunlight darted between the floating lilies of silent water meadows and shaded inlets as the raft cruised smoothly, wending its way down the broad river. It was, as Bryony later summed it up, “A good time full of friends and fine food! While Duddle went out on deck to tack into a northeast waterway, Rockleg persuaded Fleetrunn to sing a riddle song. She began by tapping a lively rhythm on the tabletop and, when they were all tapping in time with her, Fleetrunn sang.

“My first is in boulder and I have a stone,

My second is thrice in an apple alone,

My third may be found at the end of a hem,

My fourth starts a stick and a stop and a stem,

My fifths in the middle of pop, but not pip,

My sixth is the second youll find in a snip.

My first half can stop up a broad rivers flow,

My second half no daughter, the other you know.

Im found in pudden and pie and good wine,

And I know all your names, so can you tell me mine?

There was much scratching of heads and gnawing of paws as they tried to find the answer to Fleetrunns riddle song. Grinning cheerily, Duddle popped his head in the window. “Ahoy! I was listenin to yore tune as I was standtn at the tiller. Well sung, Reetrunn, I aint heard the ole damson-plum riddle song in many a season; my ole dad used to sing it!

Tutty flung an apple core at Duddle; he ducked and came up still smiling, saying, “Did I say something amiss, my liddle flowin duckweed?

His wife stamped her footpaw, glaring at him. “Flow-ersnfollies! You just told us the answer when ysaid damson-plum riddle song; tis a damson, aint it!

Duddle climbed through the window and helped himself to a ladle of damson-and-greengage pudden. “Right first time, my winnowing willow, do I win a prize?

The company fell about laughing as Tutty seized Duddles ear. “Permycloudnpoppies! Ill give you a prize. You can wash all the potsndishes, thats yore prize, you great water-bumble!

Throughout that day, laughter broke out afresh as Rockleg strode the deck of the raft, imitating Duddle skillfully. “Is it a damson plum, my delightful dandelion? Fetch me a prize!

46

Abbess Meriam was quietly enjoying the change of season. Paws tucked into her wide sleeves, she glided through the early morning mist that wreathed the orchard as if a cloud had fallen upon it. The coming days would see the beginning of harvesttime, apples ranging from red to russet-brown contrasted with mellow golden pears. Damp and dawn-dewed, the berries trailing from vine and creeper shone like jewels.

Meriam paused to look up at the vast Abbey rising from die mist; its warm red sandstone appeared softer, more dusky, in the days first hours.

Without warning, the little molemaid Figgul came dashing through the misty ground swathe and collided with the Abbess. Meriam steadied herself against a chestnut tree. “Lack a day, little one, you nearly knocked the paws from under me. What is it?

Figgul held up a fallen elm leaf excitedly. “Hurr lookee, marm, ee leafs be turnen brown!

Abbess Meriam smiled down at the mole, stroking her head. “Its called autumn. The leaves become like this because trees do not need them in the winter season. Youll be able to help with the harvest, Figgul. I recall last autumn you were too small. Remember Sister Withe let you sleep most of the day in an apple basket? But now you are big enough to help fill the baskets. Come on, wed best go in to breakfast.

Abbess and molemaid were soon swallowed up by the mist as they crossed the lawn toward Redwalls main Abbey door.

“Hurr, can oi cloimb to ee top of arpel trees, marm?

“No, no, we dont climb the trees; if you shake the lower boughs the fruit that is ripe will fall.

“Burr aye, then oi be a bough shaker an oi shake em guddnard!

“Youll have to watch-you dont shake any down onto your head. I remember a little mole named Togget doing thathe was knocked senseless by a big green pie apple.

Hazy sunlight was dispelling the ground mist as Sumin the squirrel

rapped his javelin on the threshold gate of Redwall. He had traveled through the night to reach the Abbey. He knocked once more. Barloms voice called to him as he paced the path impatiently.

“Who goes there? Is it you, Sumin?

“Of course it is, you know my knock! Open up, friend!

The Recorder mouse swung the gates wide enough to admit the sturdy squirrel. Barlom brushed his paw along Sumins tail. “Tut, tut! Look at you, drenched in dew. Come and dry off.

Sumin merely shook himself and strode purposefully off across the lawn toward the Abbey building. “No time for that, mategot news for the Abbess!

Breakfast dishes were still being cleared; the servers dawdled close to the Mother Abbesss chair, staring curiously at Sumin, to overhear the news. Meriam fixed them with a cool glance as she rose from the table, saying, “Busy paws are far more useful than busy ears.

Hurriedly they resumed their duties. Meriam indicated by a flick of her eyelids that she would see Sumin in her study. When Sumin and the Abbess vacated the dining place, speculation broke out among the Redwallers. “What dyou suppose it is?

“Hope its not vermin headed this way or anything nasty! “Ole Sumin looked as if hed been travelin hard, eh? Foremole spoke to them over the top of a tablecloth he was folding carefully into a neat oblong. “Burr, ee be gurt gossip-ers! Oi spect ee habbess will tell youm all when shem guddnready, hurr aye, so shem will.

For what seemed an age, the Abbess and Sumin remained closeted together while the squirrel related news of the victorious battle. More Redwallers left off their chores and found excuses to be inside Great Hall, where they all stood about, doing nothing, yet trying to look industrious.

Friar Bunfold and Myrtle the hogwife came from the kitchens, followed by a retinue of cooks and helpers. The Friar clapped flour from his paws and installed himself in the Abbesss chair. “Might as well wait in comfort, come on, sit down, you lot, no use pretendin yore busy when you aint. Im plain nosy, always have been, make no secret o the fact.

Bunfold had just finished speaking when Meriam and Sumin entered.

The Friar leapt up as if he had been sitting on a tack; vacating the Abbesss chair, he began busily polishing an imaginary stain from the tabletop with a corner of his floury apron.

Abbess Meriam shook Sumins paw heartily, smiling one of her rare smiles.

“Thank you so much, my friend. Im sure there is lots of good hot food in the kitchens if you havent eaten today.

The stout squirrel needed no second invitation; he strode off eagerly. The Abbess flicked a little flour dust from her chair and sat, pausing to look around the waiting faces before she started speaking.

“By tomorrow noon I would like a feast set up. I know Redwall banquets have always been without equal, but let us try to make this particular one legendary!

Myrtle raised a paw, trying to tease more information out. “Er, ow many will we be cookin for, marm?

Meriams answer set them wondering. “Twice as many as usual should be adequate, Myrtle.

Heartwood, the old otter, banged his walking stick down. “Mother Abbess, will you please tell us what is going on here? Who are we expecting, why the legendary feast? Tell us!

A loud rumble of agreement echoed around Great Hall.

The Abbess held up her paws placatingly until silence fell. “Please, friends, I know it looks as though Im teasing you, but honestly, Im not. All I can say is this. We are going to be visited tomorrow by friends, some old and others new to us. The reason why I can tell you no more is simply because gossip travels, and I do not want the surprise spoiled for a very dear friend, who shall remain nameless for the moment. So I appeal to you as Redwallers, do your jobs well and silently, and I know you will be rewarded by a sight such as Redwall has never seen, the visitation of a great creature to our Abbey. Im sorry, but that is all I can say for the present.

Sister Withe banged the table so hard that everybeast jumped. “Well, that will do me fine! Your word is good enough for me, Mother Abbess, and Im sure I speak for all Redwallers!

Everybeast hurried to agree.

“Aye, my lips are sealed!

“Say no more, marm, nods as good as a wink tme! “Youm can trust usns, marm, ho urr! “Right! Lets get to it!

“Aye, whatre we all stannin about like apples in an oven for? Come on, Redwallers, stir yore stumps!

That day and the following night, Redwall became a hive of activity. Flower gardeners staggered in under masses of blooms and blossoms, delivering them to mouseand mole-maids appointed as table decorators. Otters performed acrobatic feats alongside squirrels, garlanding high walland windowledges with streamers, lanterns, flowers, and flags. Crisp white table linen was unfolded and aired, embroiderers working on linen serviettes and place mats. Fresh-dyed rush carpeting was spread on the twice-swept stone floors. Beeswax candles were trimmed and stuck in spiked sconces. Standing on a wide shelf in the kitchens, Friar Bunfold directed cooking operations, calling out in his high squeaky voice as he kept a professional eye on all.

“Bring more firewood, I need those ovens hotter than hot!

Cooks called aloud to him as they worked.

“Will this be enough wild cherries an almonds for the slices?

“No, bring two bowls more, nothin worse than skimped cherry and almond slices. You moles there! Make sure you lift that little un out of the deep bowl before you put in yore deepernever pie mixture, we dont want a small mole baked in a pie!

“Hurrhurr, oi doant moind, zurr, oid be warmed an fed at ee same toime, hurrhurr!

“Coom outn thurr, Puckle, an stop scoffin ee pastry!

“Big fruitcakes about ready for the oven, Friar!

“Righto, Myrtle, start mixin strawberries in with the mea-dowcream, not too many now, its got to be pink, not red!

“Watershrimps an fresh button mushrooms. Friar, otter-twins just brought em inwhere dyou want em?

“Oh, right! Take them to Heartwood and tell him not to let that

hotroot pepper get near my hazelnut scones!

“I eard you, Bunfold, the otroots goin nowheres near yore scones; tell that squirrel to keep is oney away from my soup!

“Brushtip, did you hear Heartwood? Mind what yore doin with that honeyput plenty in the scone mixture. Oh, well done! Thats a nice lattice tart cover. Nothin prettier than a blackberry-an-pear tart with a good crisscross lattice of pastry on it. Open the top ovens, I can smell that bread, its ready!

“Friar, will you tell Brother Frimble that the cream is supposed to be piped onto woodland trifle in swirls, not blobs!

“Oh, stop fussin, do it in swirls with blobs in between. Dont slice those candied chestnuts so thin. I like to see a fruitcake with chestnuts in big lumps on top, holds the maple-syrup glaze better.

Casks trundled out of the wine cellars, a Redwaller pushing each one, swerving and chuckling as they dodged others rolling cheeses from the storerooms. Trestles were set up to take the barrels of October Ale from the previous autumn, and jugs-filled with cordials, fizzes and fruit cups were placed on serving trolleys. Windowledges were lined with breads, cakes and scones, set out in rows to cool. Dibbuns waited as pails of crystallized fruits and nuts were opened, dabbing their paws into any of the thick syrup that overflowed onto the tabletops. Redwallers shuffled by one another on the dormitory stairs, some going down to work, others coming off duty to rest a few hours. It was activity the whole night through to next morning, two hours after daybreak.

The raft lay moored at a place named Wuddshipp Creek. Its passengers were met by a deputation of otters and squirrels led by Skipperjo and the squirrel Redfarl. The warriors who had beaten Swam off the path to Redwall stood lined on the banks as an honor guard. Pennants of bright hues tied to their lance tips and bows, they stared in open admiration as Sunflash the Mace came ashore. He was clad in a red cloak and wearing a tunic of creamy white belted by a woven green sash. He looked every inch the Badger Lord, from the mighty gold-striped head, which towered over even the long ears of his two hares, to the fearsome mace dangling from his massive scarred paws. When everybeast was assembled on the bank, Redfarl winked at Skipperjo; he cocked an ear, listened awhile, then nodded to her. “Right yare, marm, you do the honors!

Redfarl bowed low to Sunflash. “Sire, I beg yer, wait a moment, there are creatures comin who have traveled far an long to be with ye. Will ye tarry a moment, theyll be with us soon.

The unmistakable voice of the squirrelhare, Jodd, sounded from beyond an ash thicket farther down the bank. “This way, chaps, easy as ygo, wot. Ah, there they are!

The lanky hare emerged, leading a small band of creatures. “What ho! Lord Sunflash, sah! An owl name o Wudbeak told these goodbeasts youd be comin this way, and they insisted on journeyin from their cave to be with you!

Sunflash cast aside his mace and dashed to them, shouting, “Tiny LingI! Bruff Dubbo and Elmjak! Oh, my good friends! Dearie! Lully! Look at how your little ones have grown! The two molemaids and the four young hedgehogs squealed with delight, threatening to topple the badger as they hugged his legs and footpaws.

Sunflash embraced the old moles. “Uncle Blunn and Aunt Ummer, you look brisk as bumblebees!

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While the Badger Lord was greeting his friends, Jodd wiggled his ears at Fleetrunn. He made an elegant leg at the pretty young hare, obviously stricken by her. “I say, whered you spring from, missie? You can call me Jodd, all the chaps round here do. Er, would ylike to know my full name, miss?

Redfarl shook her head at Fleetrunn. “You dont want ter know that uns full name!

Fleetrunn smiled coyly at Jodd. “Spose Ill get to know your full title soon enough, wot!

Rockleg was an older hare and a confirmed bachelor; he winked at Skipperjo. The otter leader chuckled. “Wait11 she sees ole Jodd tuckin vittles away at table, thats enough to put anybeast off im fer life, matey!

Skipperjo began bustling and hustling around the assembly. “Stir yore stumps, me carries, we cant dawdle ere all season, theres still a fair ways to gtthe Abbey!

Dearie Lingl and Lully Dubbo extricated Sunflash from their young, who were swarming over him like ants.

“Bitty, Giller, Gurmil, Tirg, leave is pore Lordship alone, youll ave im wore out afore es much older!

Lully called to her two daughters, “Yurr Nilly, cumm Podd, show ee badger zurr wot usns bringed furr ee awkburd.

She drew a small white cheese from under her apron and gave it to the molemaids, who presented it to Sunflash. The Badger Lord accepted it, shaking his head sadly. “Come, friends, lets go to Redwall Abbey. Til tell you some very sorry news as we walk.

Sister Withe and Abbess Meriam were greatly surprised at what they found on entering Bellas room in the early morning of the day when Redwall was expecting its visitors. They were certain that nobeast had spoken of the coming festivities to Bella. Yet there she stood, shining silver from brush and comb, clad in a beautiful woven cloak of light purple, her head garlanded with a coronet of gillyflowers and young white roses.

Meriam bowed instinctively before the regal old badger, saying, “Bella, you look magnificent!

The silver badger picked up the carved, silver-mounted stick she used for walking. “Thank you, Meriam, I felt that I must look my best on the day I meet my son the Badger Lord.

Meriam gasped. “Buthow did you know? Who told you? Nobody but I knew

Bella sat in her armchair and shook the stick. “Long before you knew of my sons arrival, I was told of it in a dream.

Mcriam nodded understand!ngly. “Ah yes, your badger ancestors, no doubt.

Bella beckoned to them both. “Sit down, I have something to tell you. It was no long-dead badger kin of mine that appeared in my dream, but one whom I knew well in the old days. Martin the Warrior, hero of Redwall and Chief Founder of this Abbey.

Abbess Meriams usual composure deserted her. “Martin the great Mouse Warrior! He spoke to you?

Bella closed her eyes, smiling happily. “Yes, I can see him now. His message was not only for me, but for all Redwallers. Listen now. I was sleeping here in my chair some moons ago when he appeared before me. Fully armored and carrying his great sword, Martin told me of my son, of how he would defeat the Warlord Sixclaw and lose his friend Skarlath the hawk. He said that Sunflash would come to this Abbey when the leaves turned brown and that I would live to see him. He made me feel happy; a great peace such as I have never known filled my heart. Then he gave me this message to pass on to you....

The two mice sat entranced as Bella spoke.

“Good creatures dwelling within these walls,

Be faithful, honest, and true.

My spirit is near; when harm befalls,

I will comfort and counsel you.

Throughout all seasons, I will be here,

Fear neither evil, nor strife.

The Warrior protects all you hold dear;

To my Redwall comrades, long life!

Soft morning sunlight flooded through the window, enveloping Bella in an aura of light, twinkling and sparkling off her ancient silver-furred form, clothing her in mysterious radiance.

Meriams voice was hushed with wonder. “Martin the Warrior is the spirit of peace and courage; our Abbey will remain safe forever with him to guide us.

Bella broke the spell, holding out her paws for assistance. “Come on, you two young uns, help me up. Only a light breakfast today. Save your appetites until after they arrive, when the noon is high.

By midmorning everything was ready. Bella and the Abbess had pronounced the preparations well done and perfectly in order. RedwalTs newest additions, Ole Hoffy the dormouse, with his grandmice, Young Hoffy and Brund, led the procession to the outer walltops. Banners and pennants fluttered in the breeze, flowers and vines were draped over the westand north-facing ramparts. Every Redwaller was scrubbed, brushed, and wearing their festive finery. Sumin perched upon the northwest battlements, scouring path and woodland with his keen eyes, listening for any sound that would announce the arrival of visitors. A mood of gaiety prevailed; Dibbuns and young ones danced excitedly, their elders speculating eagerly.

“How big and fierce is a Badger Lord supposed to be? “Phwaw! Big as three of us stood atop of one another! “Aye, theym sayen ee carry a gurt war club, hurr, etd take foive o usns to lift it, theym callen et ee macer!

“Haha, if the Badger Lords that big hell take some feed-in r

“Hurr oi wager eell eat moren ten arebeasts cudd! Even Abbess Meriams customary serenity was strained. “Is it near midday, Barlom? I hope theyll be here soon. Can you see any sign yet, Sumin, do you hear anything?

The little molemaid Figgul tugged Meriams gown. “Oi gets scolded furr arskin too many questions, marm, moind ee owd badgermarm doant send ee off tbed, hurr!

Bella pursed her lips in mock censure of the Abbess. “Shes right, Meriam, one more word from you and its up the stairs and no feast!

Theyll come when they come, and not before. Isnt that right, Friar Bunfold?

“Right yare, Bella marm, yknow what I always say:

“Apples is ripe when theyre ready, When pears is ripe theyll fall, What must happen will happen, Or it wont happen at all!

Heartwood glanced imploringly at the clear blue sky. “Huh, thats a great comfort tknow an no mistake.

“Hist, there! Let me listen, quiet, everybeast! Sumin cupped a paw around his ear and, gripping the battlement gable with his tail, he leaned outward, facing north. Silence fell over the Redwallers; every ear was strained into the southerly drifting breeze.

Myrtle the hogwife coughed, and everybeast turned to glare at her.

Then Sumin signaled wildly to Barlom. “Throw open the gates, its them, I hear em comin!

Leading the column, Skipperjo stepped out of the woodlands and onto the path, pointing with his javelin.

“Theres the spire o Redwall yonder, mates. Lets see ifn we can make em ear us. Dye all know Ome Returnin?

There was not a beast marching who had not heard or sung the famous old marching song before. They roared lustily.

“See the smoke curl from the chimney,

An the mat beside the door,

On the path there stands the family,

Like you left em long before.

Home returning, home returning,

Seasons gone an young uns grown,

Home returning, home returning,

Back to those I call my own!

There the fire bums and the ale brews,

And the bread bakes soft an brown.

While my friends wait with the good news,

Bring my chair an sit me down.

Home returning, home returning,

Comes the warrior from the war,

Home returning, home returning,

Home to wander nevermore!

Voices rising to their limit, they sang the last chorus over again, drawing out the last word with all their might.

Bella gripped Sumins paw like a vice. “Do you see my son? Where is Sunflash?

The squirrel shook his head in admiration as he pointed. “I see him fine, marm! He strides out until they run to keep up with him, he stands out like an oak among ferns. Great seasons in the land! Now I know what a Badger Lord looks like!

The Abbess, Sumin, and Ole Hoffy stayed to assist Bella.

All the other Redwallers clattered down the wallstairs to the main threshold gate, where they stood on the path, waiting until Bella arrived, because it was her special day above all days. The Abbey dwellers raised a cheer as Bella stood out on the path, ready to lead them. She turned, smiling.

“Well, would you like to hear the war cry of a Badger Lord? When I give the signal, shout out the word Eeulalia, but make it loud and long. Ready, set, go!

“Eeulaliaaaaaa!

Sunflash swung his mace in circles above his head and, drawing air into his cavernous chest, he bellowed back the badger war cry.

“Eeulaliaaaaa!

Foremole clapped paws over both ears. “Whurr, et sounden loik thunder afore ee storm! Lookit, yurr hem a comen!

Sunflash had caught sight of the silver badger leading the Redwallers along the path. He knew it could only be one creature, his mother, Bella. Passing the mace to Skipperjo, he ran the final distance, paws pounding the path like hammers, spurting dust up in a cloud, to the accompaniment of loud cheers from both groups.

He skidded to a halt and walked the last three paces slowly. There before him was the gentle old face he had seen in dreams. In the silence that followed, only two words were spoken.

“Mother.

“Son.

And that is how Sunflash the Mace, Lord of Salamandastron, came to Redwall Abbey and found his mother, Bella of Brocktree.

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On that same hour of the next day, the feast was still in progress and showed no signs of slackening.

Bryony sat beneath her favorite old apple tree in the orchard with Barlom and Abbess Meriam. The Redwall Recorder had brought quill and parchment to document the mousemaids story. She told it frankly, leaving out no detail. Abbess Meriam sat in silence until the recital was at an end.

The calm kind eyes of Redwalls Abbess met those of the mousemaid. “So, Bella and I were wrong, there was some good in Veil, even though it cost him his life to show it. Can you accept my apologies, Bryony?

The mousemaid kissed her Mother Abbesss paw respectfully. “There is no need for your apology. Veil was bad, I know that now. Bella was right. Some creatures cannot help being the way they are. In all the time we knew him, Veil did not perform one act of kindness to any living creature. I have thought a great deal since he died and wondered if he would have saved me if he knew his father was really going to throw that javelin. I couldnt help loving him, because thats the way I am, but I know that the world is a better place without Veil or Swartt bringing death and misery to it.

Meriam cast a knowing glance at Barlom before she replied, “You have grown, Bryony. Your courage and compassion were never in doubt, but you have returned to us wiser and more sensible, far more mature than I ever was at your age. What do you think, Barlom?

The Recorder finished rolling his scrolls. “I think in the seasons to come, Redwall will not lack a good Mother Abbess; that is, of course, marm, when you feel the need to pass on your title.

Meriam placed a paw around Bryonys shoulders. “I could think of no one better to be Mother of Redwall some day.

Bryony could scarce believe what she was hearing. “MeAbbess of Redwall?

“The same as Togget will be made Foremole when the time comes. You have earned both admiration and respect from many elders.

Myrtle the hogwife trundled a fresh cart laden with hot scones, cheese, and salad vegetables from the kitchens to the dining tables of Great Hall. Most of the feasters were resting, or playing with the young ones, but the die-hard core of trencher-beasts remained.

“Aint you lot finished yet? Myrtle groaned.

Rockleg smiled winningly at her. “Not as long as theres such splendid food bein served!

Myrtle sighed, then sat down with them. “Then I might as well join you; pass the mint tea, please.

Duddle Pollspike pushed it across obligingly. “Mint tea, there you are, my chubby-cheeked chaffwarbler. It almost makes me wish I was a landlubber, dinin in this wunnerful Abbey. What say you, my liddle larkspur?

Tutty Pollspike looked up from a raspberry crumble. “Landsnlakes! Tis all very nice, but weve been waterbeasts too long to change our ways now.

Redfarl broke the crust of a pastie, letting the gravy spill out. “Wot about you, longshanksthinkin of changin yore ways?

Jodd cut himself a slice of fruitcake, a silly grin all over his face as he twisted his ears at Fleetrunn. “Whazzat? Oh, er, rather! Id sooner be a square any time than a hirrel!

Fleetrunn giggled. “Dont you mean youd sooner be a hare than a squirrel, you great duffer? Fancy bein called a squir-relhare, daft name!

Jodd bolted the fruitcake reflectively. “Oh, I dunno really. I dont mind daft names as long as a chap has a good sensible real name. By the way, Fleetrunn, I never told you my real name, did I? Well, its actually Wilthurio Longbarrow Sack-firth Toxophola Fedlric ...

Outside on the sunlit lawns of Redwall Abbey, the happy laughter of old and young alike rose to mingle with high lark-song on the warm autumn afternoon.

Epilogue

The young hare Burrbob twitched his nose inquisitively at Rillbrook the Wanderer.

“Is the tale finished? Oh, rats! I wanted it to go on an on an jolly well on frever!

The old otter stood and stretched, balancing back on his rudderlike tail. “Well, young cheekychops, yknow wot they say. Theres bread an cheese upon the shelf, want another story, tell it yself.

The harewife brought out rosehip-and-daisy cordial and some plum-and-damson cake. Together with the group of leverets, she had been listening spellbound to the story, only absenting herself occasionally to bring food. Placing the cake and cordial in front of the old otter, she questioned him. “What happened to Jodd and Fleetrunn? Did they marry?

“Aye, and stayed on at Redwall. Rockleg didnt, though. He came back to Salamandastron with Sunflash. But that was many seasons later, after old Bella had passed on to the Dark Forest. Sunflash would not leave the Abbey while his mother lived. She went peaceful and happy, long beyond her allotted seasons. They say no badger ever lived longer than Bella.

“And did Bryony ever become Abbess?

“Yes, she was in her middle seasons when Meriam retired and passed on the title to her. Togget became Foremole, too. Now can I get on with this food, or are you goin to ask me questions until I goes blue in me ole face answering?

“Just one more thing. Is it true that Sunflash gave up being a warrior after he returned here? I have heard old ones say that he did.

“No, he was always ready to defend the coastline or make war on searats and such vermin. Though he loved growing things so much that he was only known to his enemies as the Mace. Here at Salamandastron he cultivated the slopes of this mountain the way they are now, fertile and beautiful. As the seasons passed he became an expert farmer, and creatures traveled from far and wide to learn from his great wisdom. In time, he changed his warrior name from Sunflash to the more gentle Sunstripe. Also he was the first Badger

Lord to write poetry, an unusual quality in anybeast who was ever possessed by the bloodwrath.

“Here, come with me and Ill show ye something.

Followed by a curious group of leverets, the harewife and Rillbrook made their way up a rocky path bordering a terraced garden. The otter halted at a stone slab seat. “Watch now, Ill show you something my father showed me, just as his father showed him....

The cheeky Burrbob muttered under his breath, “An his father showed him, just as his Auntie Bangtail showed him an ... Yowch!

The harewife tweaked his ear warningly, and he fell silent as Rillbrook continued.

“Theres not many seen this. My ancestors were showed it by an old Badger Lord who came after Sunflash. Here, watch now. The seat was made by two flat slabs placed one on top of the other. He lifted the top slab to reveal the bottom stone beautifully carved in fine badger script.

Here I often gaze out oer the seas,

When winter snows have gone to spring so fair,

Alone, except for butterflies and bees,

Remembering the times we used to share.

Your spirit soars oer places where Id walk,

Not holding any friend on earth so true,

Upon my shoulder, good and faithful hawk,

O Skarlath, there was never one like you!

With heavy heart I sit alone in grief,

Lord of the mountain, ruling over all,

Wishing I could split a single leaf,

To bring you back again, with our old call.

The harewife traced her paw over the letters carved countless seasons

ago, saying quietly, “A great and wise badger with many unusual qualities.

The old otter leaned on his traveling staff, watching the young hares gathered around the stone, reading the poem. “Aye, Salamandastron flourished under his rule. It would be good for these young uns to learn from one like Sunflash.

Burrbob looked up from the carved seat. “Theres not been a jolly old Badger Lord here for absolute ages, sirwell, not in my lifetime there aint.

Rillbrook put his paw around the young hares shoulder, smiling and shaking his head. “Great seasons, not in your lifetime? That must be a fair old span of dusty days!

Burrbob looked hopefully up at the old storyteller. “Dyou think a badger will ever come to Salamandastron again, sir?

Rillbrook sat the young hare down upon the stone seat. “This mountain is never without a Badger Lord for too long. The warrior spirit seems to draw them here from afar. If you sit here for a short time each day and watch those shores below, some day youll see that badger come striding along. Grow up strong and honest, all of you, and serve that badger well. It is the duty of Salamandastron hares to do this.

Drawing his cloak about him, Rillbrook the Wanderer tapped his ash-pole staff on the rock and set off on his travels. “Farewell, my friends, and thank you for your hospitality, but the wayside beckons and the breezes call me away.

As Rillbrook picked his way slowly down the mountainside, the harewife called after him, “Wait on the shore below, Ill bring you a haversack of food!

Rillbrook waved his staff in acknowledgment.

Remembering their manners, Burrbob and the young hares scrambled to assist the old otter down the slope.

“What ho, sir, lean on me!

“Where do you journey to now, sir?

Rillbrook winked at the pretty leveret who had asked the question.

“Why, to Red wall Abbey, where else? It will take me several seasons to haul my old carcass that far, but fate and friends have always been good to me. Never fear, Ill make it by next autumn. Its a pretty place to be at harvest time, and the door is always open to friends. Maybe someday youll visit there. Im sure theyd make you welcome.

The young hares and the harewife stood on the beach, watching Rillbrook the Wanderer growing small as he trekked off east into the golden afternoon.

Burrbob raised his paw. “Lets send the old un on his way with a good oF war cry.

Throwing back their heads, they roared out the time-honored call of Salamandastron.

“Eeulaliaaaaaaa!

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